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INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

INDIGENOUS WOMEN



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contents

CONTENTS

editorial

Kathrin Wessendorf

4

africa

SAN WOMEN TODAY: INEQUALITY AND
DEPENDENCY IN A POST-FORAGING WORLD

Renee Sylvain

8

TWA WOMEN IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION

*"WE WANT OUR CHILDREN TO KNOW HOW TO TAKE
THEIR FUTURE INTO THEIR OWN HANDS"*

Dorothy Jackson

14

FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

Naomi Kipuri

22

TAMACHEK WOMEN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Saoudata Aboubacrine

28

americas

INTERVIEW WITH NINA PACARI

32

QUEBEC NATIVE WOMEN:
COUNTERING VIOLENCE

Michèle Rouleau

36

THE DISPARATE TREATMENT OF NATIVE AMERICAN
WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES

39

asia

INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND ACTIVISM IN ASIA:
WOMEN TAKING THE CHALLENGE
IN THEIR STRIDE

Jannie Lasimbang

40

INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND
THE ARMED CONFLICTS IN NEPAL

Stella Tamang

46



circumpolar north

GENDER IN SÁPMI – SOCIO-CULTURAL
TRANSFORMATIONS AND NEW CHALLENGES

Jorunn Eikjok

52

THE FLEXIBILITY OF GREENLANDIC WOMEN

Gitte Tránheim

58



Cover: Garo and Khasi women, Meghalaya, India 2001. Photo: Christian Erni

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Kathrin Wessendorf



Photo: Jan Kjær, Mellemfolkeligt Samvirke

The Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues was established in 2001 and will hold its 3rd session in New York in May this year. At its 2nd session, the Permanent Forum decided to make Indigenous Women the focus of attention for 2004.

This issue of Indigenous Affairs brings together articles by indigenous and non-indigenous authors that describe the situation of indigenous women in different parts of the world. The articles reflect on the situation of indigenous women, who are often doubly discriminated against as indigenous people and as women.

Many indigenous societies have traditionally egalitarian gender patterns in which men and women complement each other in their work and within the family. Many of the articles stress the fact that it is the influence of majority societies, through colonisation and repression, that has restructured these egalitarian roles. Many indigenous women now find themselves confronted with unequal conditions imposed by the dominant society and subsequently taken up by their own communities. In Sápmi, the influence of the majority society on indigenous culture has led to the man's role becoming that of "bread winner", while the woman's role is now confined to the home. Whereas the traditional ideal is that women and men are equal, the reality in current Sami society is different. Nevertheless, as Jorunn Eikjok describes in her article, the Sami women's movement was severely criticized by Sami society for following the majority society's ideals: *".. the attitude was that women who struggled for equal gender rights had misunderstood the Sami woman's role, and were less Sami than they ought to be"*. The Sami women were also criticized by non-indigenous women for their focus on indigenous issues, *"We were unpopular among our fellow sisters in the wider community for bringing in our ethnic and cultural identity as women. Our brothers ridiculed us because gender was irrelevant for them"*, says Jorunn Eikjok from her own experience. Societal change through colonization and the introduction of Christianity is also at the core of the article on Greenland. Men have been placed in a position where their traditional hunting activities are now classified as labour external to the house, whilst women's traditional work is now classified as "housewife's work". The San in the Omaheke region of Namibia have lost their land and are working for white farmers and on cattle posts,

where life is organised according to the farmer's racial and gender ideologies. Whereas men work as waged labour, women are attributed domestic tasks and paid much less than men, which results in their dependency upon men. Introducing the concept of male labour as wage labour and female labour as domestic support has, along with concepts of ownership, restructured many indigenous societies.

Land rights are a central issue for indigenous peoples. The influence of majority societies has also had a bearing on the situation of indigenous women in relation to land. In the Great Lakes region, Twa women's rights to land have been weakened by individual property rights systems as opposed to their own traditional forest-based communal land tenure systems. Nowadays, it is mainly the men that own the land, and this makes the women more dependent. In Nepal, according to the law of the Hindu majority, women are not allowed to inherit property, thereby discriminating against both Hindu and indigenous women.

Saoudata Aboubacrine describes how Tamachek (or Touareg) women have traditionally held a strong position in their societies. But numerous conflicts in the area and the consequent disruption has resulted in their adopting the customs of their neighbours, such as male polygamy and female circumci-

sion, thereby weakening the position of Tamachek women.

Whereas circumcision (or female genital mutilation as it is nowadays more often called) is a new phenomenon among the Touareg, it is traditional among the pastoralist communities of Kenya and is still practised. Many of these communities are remote and have poor infrastructure. They are also marginalized and see traditional rites as a way of strengthening their communities. However, whereas many other aspects of culture have been changed or have disappeared, as Naomi Kipuri stresses in her article, in this case even the severity of the cut remains. FGM is a violation of the human rights of the girls that suffer it and the initiatives of women from communities that practise FGM have to be supported, as only they can encourage FGM to be abandoned by finding culturally appropriate alternatives to this tradition.

Violence against women is discussed in several articles, describing the various circumstances and forms of violence executed by different actors. Violence can be a consequence of external conflict or of the domestic environment a woman finds herself in.

When instability and conflict prevail, it is often the women that suffer the most. In her article on the Twa of the Great Lakes region, Dorothy Jackson describes how

Photo: Tebteba



women suffer through the conflict taking place in their countries, being victims of ethnic discrimination and physical violence, often being sexually molested or raped by several parties to the conflict. Furthermore, raped Twa women are often ostracized by their own communities through fear of their being infected with HIV.

Rape is also used as a way of controlling and systematically humiliating a people. Women may become targets of rape and sexual harassment in order to subdue and break indigenous communities in conflict situations. In her article, Jannie Lasimbang notes that women activists are often particularly at risk of being targeted by the military. A specific example is given by Stella Tamang, who writes about indigenous women in the conflict between the military and the Maoist movement in Nepal. One consequence of violent conflict is an increase in the number of female-headed households due to men migrating or being involved in the conflict. Women have to fend for themselves and their children, and they become the only providers for their families.

Women play a critical role in ending conflicts and are often instrumental in peace-building processes. Women come together to promote peace and reconciliation, often putting themselves in danger to get the men to stop fighting. However, women are again marginalized in the peace talks and autonomy processes. This leads to the conclusion that women's role in the struggle for peace does not automatically result in their greater role in formal peace processes or in post-conflict societies.



Khasi women at market. Photo: Christian Erni

Indigenous women are also particularly exposed to violence in non-conflict situations due to ethnic discrimination. In the case of the San in Namibia, the widespread belief that San women are promiscuous and therefore do not “feel raped” when assaulted increases the particular vulnerability of indigenous women. In the U.S., indigenous women have historically been – and remain – subject to racism and gender bias in the area of health care services and preventive health treatment, as described in the information based on an article by Mililani Trask.

Besides being exposed to “outside” violence, indigenous women are often victims of severe domestic violence. Frustration based on marginalisation, loss of culture and discrimination leads to less sustainable communities and a higher degree of violence within them. Violence is often related to alcohol consumption. Domestic violence and alcohol-related abuse are mentioned in many of the articles in this issue of Indigenous Affairs. Michèle Rouleau introduces us to the Québec Native Women's organisation, which particularly promotes non-violence in indigenous communities and families. The organisation was founded in 1974 and has since then registered substantial success through promoting the issue and “breaking the silence” around domestic violence.

A statement from the South-east Asia and Pacific participants at the “Indigenous Women overcoming violence workshop” in Chiang Mai, Thailand, September 2003 stated, “*Violence against women is not just a domestic concern. Rather it is a serious social issue and an*



Ceremonial cooking in the Lisu-Forest. Photo: Christian Erni

urgent human rights concern for many women living in constant fear and insecurity over their lives and safety”.

Whereas many of the above mentioned issues are of concern to women in general, indigenous women are doubly discriminated against, being both indigenous and women. If we include the issue of poverty, we can say that indigenous women are triply discriminated against, as indigenous peoples are among the poorest of the poor. The issue of land is fundamental for indigenous peoples and is of great importance to indigenous women as well, whereas it is hardly ever mentioned by non-indigenous women’s organisations.

Despite the ongoing discrimination of indigenous women, some positive developments have taken place in recent years. Not only have indigenous women started to speak out and raise awareness of their situation, but some have also achieved important leadership positions and have contributed to another view of women and indigenous peoples. This Indigenous Affairs includes an interview with Nina Paccari, who was the first indigenous woman Foreign Secretary of the Republic of Ecuador, in which she tells about the indigenous movement in Ecuador and her role within the movement. Looking at the international stage, many indigenous women participate in meetings at the United Nations and are active in promoting their rights. In preparation for the next meeting of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in May 2004, a number of preparatory conferences have taken place in the Americas, Asia and Africa in which indigenous

women have voiced their concerns and described their particular situation. It is also important to inform indigenous women as to how to report human right violations without having to travel to international meetings, as Jannie Lasimbang stresses in her article. Indigenous women’s role in decision-making processes is crucial. Women can change the gender perception of society by taking leadership roles.

Increasingly, indigenous women are forming organisations that target their specific needs and concerns. Indigenous women’s organisations focus on issues that non-indigenous women’s organisations take up as well, such as health issues related to reproductive health, violence in general and domestic violence in particular, trafficking in women, women and labour, etc. However, indigenous women’s organisations incorporate in all these issues a specific ethnic approach that considers the situation that indigenous women confront, being doubly or even triply discriminated against as women, indigenous and often poor. They also address other issues, such as land rights, which do not seem to be considered by non-indigenous women. In the future, it is to be hoped that indigenous organisations, as well as non-indigenous women’s organisations, along with support organisations and donors, will take the exceptional situation of indigenous women even more into consideration when designing projects, programmes and in their general policies. □



Twa woman at Busanza, Uganda. Photo: Dorothy Jackson



Nenets woman, Russia. Photo: Yasavey

SAN WOMEN TODAY: INEQUALITY AND DEPENDENCY IN A POST-FORAGING WORLD

Renée Sylvain

Women in a government resettlement camp. Photo: Renée Sylvain





People around the world are familiar with the famous “Bushmen”¹ of the Kalahari Desert. Movies, such as *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, paint a picture of a group living in harmony with nature, free from the troubles and complications of the “modern” world. Similar portraits are presented to audiences of educational and documentary programs in the West. The Bushmen – now known as “San” – have been heavily shrouded in stereotypes that define them as isolated “contemporary ancestors”. Even more ethnographically accurate depictions misrepresent the lives of the Kalahari San by sustaining the common perception that they continue to live a foraging life in the bush. In fact, the hunter-gatherers presented in popular media are only a small minority of the approximately 100,000 San in southern Africa. Most San today have been dispossessed of their land, and must work either on the cattle-posts of Bantu-speaking agro-pastoralists, or on the commercial cattle ranches owned by the descendants of white settlers. Others live in government settlement areas where they have few opportunities to make their own living.

In this paper I will examine the effects of colonisation and incorporation into a capitalist economy on a group of San in eastern Namibia. I will focus, in particular, on the ways that their incapsulation into a colonial and neo-colonial cultural political economy has altered San gender relations. Among the most devastating effects of this incapsulation has been the increase in violence against San women.²

Gender egalitarianism among foraging San

In order to appreciate the current situation of San women in a post-foraging world, it is useful to compare this context with a foraging one. Among foraging Ju/’hoansi, hunting was mostly a male activity. Although meat was (and is) the most highly valued food item among the Ju/’hoansi, bush food (roots, tubers, nuts and berries) provided the bulk of the calories consumed by the band. Gathering bush food was primarily women’s work. Women’s work was not seen as demeaning; men would also gather food, cook and look after children. Women’s gathering activities were generally recognised as important to the band’s survival.

Lee³ describes the foraging Ju/’hoansi as “fiercely egalitarian” – they had no formal or centralised leadership structures. Usually whoever emerged as a leader did so because everyone agreed that this person was a particularly competent hunter or had good judgment. Even when leadership was assigned by general agreement, such roles were informal. Most decisions were made collectively, with women and men participating in decision-making processes.

Marital residence was uxorilocal (the husband lived with the wife’s family). A potential son-in-law was required to live with his future wife’s family for a number of years in order to perform “brideservice”. To fulfill his brideservice obligations, a prospective son-in-law was required to hunt, gather and generally support his prospective parents-in-law. This enabled

the girl's parents to ensure that their prospective son-in-law was a good provider and would treat their daughter properly. When the young man proved himself capable and caring, the marriage was approved by his parents-in-law. Brideservice and uxori-local marital residence helped to keep the relationship between San husbands and wives relatively balanced.

Although the gender egalitarianism found among foraging San can be overstated⁴, San women in the foraging communities described by Lee did seem to enjoy a higher status than women in agricultural and industrial societies. This was largely because their contributions to the band's subsistence were recognised and valued, and because they enjoyed the support and backing of their kin. San women in the Omaheke Region, on the other hand, do not have the benefit of these sources of status and support.

The Omaheke region: a post-foraging world

As a result of German (1884-1915) and then South African (1915-1990) colonisation, the Omaheke San lost their traditional foraging territories to white settlers and other African groups. Unable to hunt and gather, the majority of Omaheke San are now generational farm workers and domestic servants on white-owned farms or on the cattle posts of Bantu-speaking cattle-herders. Many Omaheke San, especially those too old or too sick to work on farms, live in extreme poverty in peri-urban squatters' villages or in government resettlement camps.

San in the Omaheke live in a number of sites off the white farms. An estimated 31 % live in the "communal areas", where they work for Herero and Tswana stock owners, and where they typically receive meagre rations, and sometimes only alcohol, for their labour.⁵ San are conspicuous in the government resettlement camps in the region, where monthly distributions of drought relief food are available; but here they have few prospects for generating an income. There is also a squatters' village on the outskirts of the Epako township near the municipality of Gobabis, where a small but fluctuating community of "urban-San" live.

The contemporary gender division of labour

Life on the farms is organised according to the farmers' racial and gender ideologies. The farmers' racial ideologies define the "Bushmen" as the least civilised race of Africans. Many farmers told me quite bluntly, "*You can take the Bushman out of the bush, but you can't take the bush out of the Bushman*". The farmers claim that the San, as former hunter-gatherers, are innately and incorrigibly nomadic and therefore "unreliable" workers. Furthermore, as former foragers, working with cattle is "*not in the Bushman's nature*"; neither is domestic service. Farmers' wives told

me that the "Bushmen" don't like the smell of soap, are innately unhygienic, and, since their ancestors lived "*like animals in the bush*", they have no notions of domestic orderliness. These racial stereotypes justify paying San farm workers less than half of what non-San farm workers earn, and San domestic servants less than one-fifth of what domestic servants from other ethnic groups receive. The same stereotypes also explain why the San are the first to be laid off when drought hits or market conditions deteriorate.

When the San became incorporated into the white economy, they also became subject to European ideologies defining "proper" gender roles. The farmers' gender ideologies organise the socio-political world on the farms into male and female zones: men function in the productive world of wage labour, and women are relegated to the "domestic sphere". Women are usually paid much less than their male kin and until about 10 years ago weren't paid wages at all. This is because the farmers see the men as the breadwinners, and San women as appendages of their male kin. Unlike in the foraging context, where women's work was not considered "beneath" men to do, on the farms domestic tasks are very definitely considered "beneath" men, and usually are not considered work at all.

Adopting farm work and domestic service involved a change in the way work was organised and valued among the San. San women cannot live on a white farm unless they are living with their husbands or fathers who work for the farmer, and they do not get wage-earning opportunities unless they are recruited when the farmer approaches their husbands or fathers to hire them for domestic service. This has caused very pronounced gender inequalities to emerge among the San themselves.

Gender and generational inequalities

Incorporation into a white-dominated farming economy also reordered familial relations. This is most obvious when we look at marriage. Farm work makes traditional brideservice impossible because the men cannot leave the farms where they work to live with their future in-laws. So once young women get married, they immediately move away from their own families to live on the farms where their husbands work. San women thus became subject to their husbands' control, since they don't have the support and backing of their own families, and because their husbands are the only ones with access to the means of subsistence — that is, wage work. Also, divorce has become quite difficult since San women have no means of earning an independent living. It is possible for San women to return to the farms where their parents live, but farmers discourage too many of their workers' dependants from living on their farms; a large number of unemployed residents places economic stress on the hosting household, and leads to tensions between the farmer and his workers.



Woman in a white farm. Photo: Renée Syvain

As the San are laid off in ever-growing numbers, they are forced to go “on the road” to look for work, and so move further away from their parents and other kinfolk. As a result, elders are losing their influence on the younger generation. Also, since the independence of Namibia in 1990 brought about the liberalisation of trade markets and the introduction of labour legislation, many farmers have been loading their pick-up trucks with elderly San workers and dumping them in squatters’ villages and resettlement camps in order to avoid the cost of maintaining “surplus” people on their farms. Thus, elderly San have been made “redundant” in the Omaheke economy, and are losing their former status as wise and politically influential members of their community.

Conflict and violence

San women that I interviewed on the farms explained to me that wives must always do what their husbands say (of course they don’t). San women, they explained, are “under” their husbands – the husband is the “boss”. During a group interview conducted on a white farm in 1997, I was told by one young San woman

She [a wife] must always listen to him [her husband]. She must do things which he tells her to do...if he says you must do something for him then you must do it. And you don’t come to sit and talk about it. Then it is only fighting...[the husband is the boss] because you are under him and you must listen to him...it was also like that [in the old times]. You must always listen to your husband...it is right. It’s like a rule.

The other women in the group all nodded their heads while she said this. While I was in the Omaheke, I frequently encountered San women with black eyes – usually given by their husbands. Wife-battering was most often associated with drinking, and was usually “provoked” by a wife’s “disobedient” behaviour. San husbands are known to get physical if their wives resist their plans to quit their jobs and leave a farm. San women resist such moves because leaving a farm usually means a dramatic decline in their standard of living. But in these cases the “fighting” usually involves shoving and pulling, and the women often shove back. Where fights involve punching, kicking, or stabbing, alcohol was always involved. The following cases illustrate the common scenarios.

In 1997 I visited a farm where the white farmer regularly supplied his workers with alcohol as a form of payment; he also beat them with walking sticks and chained them around their necks. The San

on this farm were quite desperate, extremely impoverished, unhappy – and frequently inebriated. In September 1998, a young San farm worker got extremely drunk and, after arguing with his pregnant wife, he picked up a knife and stabbed her to death. Although I was unable to verify the information I was given about this incident, San I spoke to told me that the argument erupted because the wife was reluctant to leave the farm and go “on the road”.

In January of 1997, a San farm worker returned home to his shack in the workers’ compound on a white farm after drinking heavily with friends on a nearby farm. He got into an argument with his wife. In the ensuing fight, their infant was killed. The husband and wife had different stories to tell the court. The wife claimed her husband was drunk and tried to kick her in the head, but missed her and kicked the baby suckling at her breast. The husband claimed that the wife was drunk and dropped the baby, and that he had attacked her because he came home to find her in bed with another man. The judge in the case decided that the wife’s infidelity provided sufficient provocation for the attack, and acquitted the husband.⁶

The judge’s decision in this case reflected a ubiquitous attitude that encourages proprietary behaviour among men toward their wives, and this certainly affects women from all ethnic groups in Namibia. However, San women are particularly disempowered by these attitudes because they belong to a landless ethnic underclass and so have few social or economic resources to resist ideologies that define them as the “property” of their husbands.

The problem of family violence among the San is not confined to fights between husbands and wives. There are increasing numbers of incidents of younger San, particularly men, attacking parents and grandparents.

N!uka, a San woman I spoke to in July 2001, described what was happening to San families in the urban squatters’ village where she lived. She told me that young San men were getting involved in local gangs, drinking, smoking dagga (marijuana), and engaging in criminal activities. This behaviour, according to N!uka, was causing young San men to behave disrespectfully toward their parents and their elders generally. She told me:

Your own child that you took care of is going to be with the other boys, and then he is going to make a mess of you. My grandfather, if he goes to get his pension, on the way, even my own son will rob him and take his money. We did not grow up like that. There is no respect ... The adults are afraid of their children, if they say anything, they will be beaten. If you say, “don’t do that”, then you will be beaten up by your son.

N!uka lives in the township of Epako located four kilometres east of Gobabis. The residents are primarily “black” Africans – Damara, Herero, Tswana, and Ovambo – but there is also a fairly large population of Namas and a smaller community of San. The two most important sources of income for the San in Epako are domestic

service and old-age pensions. Most San women comprise a “second-tier” domestic labour force, doing laundry or raking yards for Herero and Tswana neighbours in return for a small wage, some food or home brew. Since San men have difficulty competing with Herero, Tswana, Damara and Ovambo men for higher-paying jobs in construction work, most do odd jobs as handymen or work in the gardens of their non-San neighbours – also in return for a small wage, food or home brew.

Just after independence one of the only ways to make money in the township was to establish *cucashops*, where home brew (called *tombo*) is made and sold. Tswanas, Hereros and Ovambos quickly cornered the market in illicit beer brewing, since they had access to the cash needed to purchase the supplies. The San have few similar opportunities to earn money through informal sector work. Instead, non-San generate income for themselves by selling home brew to San, who purchase the beer to “kill the hunger”. In the township, *tombo* is often the cheapest and most readily available source of sustenance. Increasingly, San are working for non-San in return for *tombo*, which is found in abundance at the *cuca* shops run by non-San gang leaders.

Young San men are joining township gangs lead by Herero and Ovambo men, who recruit the San to rob money, sell drugs, and run other minor errands. While young San men work as “go-fors” or “foot soldiers” for gang leaders, young San women perform domestic tasks and occasionally provide sexual services in return for *tombo* or a little bit of money. San women in Epako are at an extremely high risk for rape, especially on the weekends, when the heaviest drinking takes place. Assaults on young San women are most commonly associated with drinking and socialising at the *cuca* shops, and so one often hears the question, “*What was that girl doing in such a place?*” This rhetorical question reflects the common attitude that women’s conduct and mobility must be “policed” by the threat of sexual assault. Although this is a threat faced by all women, San women are particularly vulnerable because of a widespread belief that “Bushmen” women are highly promiscuous and generally sexually available – when they are assaulted, they don’t “feel” raped.

On the farms, San women’s subordination is largely owed to highly regulated social and labour relations ordered according to the farmers’ racial and gender ideologies. In the township, on the other hand, San women’s vulnerability is a result of violence and intimidation that emerge where ethnic tensions and struggles for survival are played out in an unregulated and lawless socio-economic environment.

Conclusion

As a result of incorporation into the farming economy San women have become economically dependent and vul-

nerable to violence. Although the cases outlined above represent extremes in violent behaviour that are owed largely to drinking, San women are also vulnerable to less extreme forms of coercion because of their economically dependent status. Since San women have no independent access to employment or residence rights on a farm, and earn only supplementary wages in return for domestic service, they are highly dependent on their men folk, who farmers treat as the primary breadwinners. San men are, by most accounts, increasingly willing to resort to violence, and often batter their wives to assert their authority. Similarly, elders are not respected to the same extent that they were in the past, since they are often felt to be economic burdens by impoverished kinfolk who must support them, and are seen as “superfluous” by white farmers. Traditional attitudes toward elders were characterised either by respect or by very close affectionate relationships. However, as N!uka’s comment indicates, traditional attitudes are dissolving, and older San are increasingly targets of younger San seeking easy cash and acceptance into non-San gangs. With the decline in the status of elders, traditional values that accorded San women higher status decline as well.

Sustaining and exacerbating these gender and generational asymmetries are, (1) the psychological distress that comes with poverty; (2) the generally exploitative and abusive relationships between the San and non-San in the region; (3) the addiction to alcohol that afflicts many San of the younger generation, especially (but not exclusively) San men; and (4) the increasing participation of younger San men in criminal activities as a means of getting money and coping with the generally violent environment in which they live.

Although their traditional sources of status and support have largely been eroded, San women are not simply passive victims of male dominance and ethnic marginalisation. They are crucial actors in maintaining kin and community connections among the widely scattered farm San. Also, an increasing number of San women from all over Namibia are becoming involved in community activism as members of the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA), and San women from the Omaheke Region are working with the Omaheke San Trust (OST). San women are participating in WIMSA’s trainee and internship programs, where they receive on-the-job training in administration and development issues at WIMSA’s head office. San women are also participating in an Oral Testimony Collection Project, which is designed to accumulate historical information that may facilitate San struggles for rights and resources. According to WIMSA’s *Report on Activities (2001-2002)*, San women in the Omaheke Region are being trained as “community mobilisers”, a job that involves improving San school attendance and increasing awareness among educators about the issues San children face at school. San women face problems that are unique, and that cannot be adequately addressed by focusing either on

their ethnic marginalisation “as San” or on their subordination “as women”. Their marginalisation, exploitation and subordination are owed to the collusion of gender, racial/ethnic and class inequalities that also produce conflicts and tensions among the San themselves. It is therefore imperative that “women’s issues” and “minority issues” be broadened to include the distinctive experiences of women who are members of indigenous minorities. □

Notes

- 1 The term “Bushmen” is widely regarded as racist and sexist, and the term “San” is now used by many anthropologists, local activists and NGOs to refer collectively to the many linguistic groups of former foragers in southern Africa.
- 2 See also Gaeses 1998.
- 3 Lee 1997.
- 4 See Becker 2003.
- 5 Suzman 1995.
- 6 Menges 2000a and 2000b.

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TWA WOMEN IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION

WE WANT OUR CHILDREN TO KNOW HOW TO
TAKE THEIR FUTURE INTO THEIR OWN HANDS

Dorothy Jackson

Twa women at Kalehe, DRC. Photo: Dorothy Jackson





We parents, we have lived a miserable life. We don't want our children to live as we do today. We want our children to get a living like other people, so that our situation ... and the problems we face don't get passed onto the next generation. We want them to know the truth and their rights ... to study and progress, and know how to take their future into their own hands. Our time was a time of ignorance ... because we didn't know our rights we were subjected to many constraints and many problems. Twa widow, Gitega, Burundi

The Twa: a discriminated indigenous people

The Twa of Burundi, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda and southwest Uganda were originally a high altitude forest people living in the mountains around Lakes Albert, Kivu and Tanganyika. Their total population is estimated at less than 100,000.¹ In most of their traditional territory the Twa have lost their forest lands and resources through encroachment by farming and herding peoples, commercial development projects and conservation. As the Twa were forced into contact with the dominant society, they were increasingly exposed to widespread ethnic prejudice and discrimination from neighbouring ethnic groups. Twa people were considered stupid, dirty, immoral and even sub-human, they had to keep themselves segregated from other groups, and their rights as humans and as citizens were denied.² These attitudes are beginning to change but are still prevalent.

The Twa are now one of the most disadvantaged groups in the Great Lakes region, in terms of land ownership, where there is already severe competition for land. Many Twa are landless squatters on neighbouring groups' lands. Some Twa have managed to obtain land outside the forest, mainly through gifts from their erstwhile patrons, the former traditional rulers or *Mwamis*, and latterly through small-scale government land distribution or NGO land purchase schemes. However statistics from Burundi and Rwanda show that Twa farm plots are significantly smaller than those of the dominant groups³, and the land is often of poorer quality. Furthermore, many Twa communities have lost land by selling it to neighbours for a pittance in times of hunger, or because neighbours or local government officials have expropriated it.⁴

In parts of eastern DRC where forests still exist and have not been given over to conservation, Twa are still able to maintain a partially forest-based economy, and the culture that goes with it. But in most of the region, Twa now eke out a living by labouring for others, by selling traditional pottery (which is no longer profitable but is culturally very significant for the Twa), and by opportunistic searching for food, including begging. The combination of lack of land and deep-rooted ethnic discrimination means that the Twa have very few natural, financial or human resources they can turn to for their livelihoods, and the institutional frameworks of the countries they live in have, until recently, been oblivious to their needs. As a result, the Twa are among the poorest people in the region, with very unequal access to education, health services, housing and justice.⁵

Regional conflict

The problems that Twa communities face are intensified by the violent conflict that has ravaged the region from before the time of independence. The most recent conflict has its roots in the 1994 Rwandan genocide, in which 800,000 Tutsi, moderate Hutu and Twa were killed in 3 months by “*Interahmwe*” Hutu extremists, who then fled into neighbouring countries, especially DRC. Determined to root out the *Interahamwe*, Rwanda backed two rebel uprisings in eastern DRC, but the new DRC regime that had seized power from the enfeebled President Mobutu of Zaïre reneged on its promise to assist Rwanda and asked Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe to help crush the rebels. By early 1999 there were eight armies and at least 12 other armed groups active in DRC, mostly in the east. Twa communities reported pillaging and burning of their settlements, forced labour, torture and murder.

The Rwandan-backed forces retained control of eastern DRC, and Ugandan-backed groups were active further north against insurgents that were attacking Uganda. Two rebel groups fighting the Burundi govern-

ment also operated out of DRC. The presence of these armed factions in DRC was used by neighbouring governments to justify their continued occupation of DRC while at the same time exploiting DRC’s rich mineral and forest resources.⁶ During 2003 the conflict abated as rebel groups were incorporated into power-sharing governments in DRC and Burundi, and foreign forces withdrew. However, one rebel faction is still attacking the Burundi government and although the DRC war is officially over, the government does not have control of the east and northeast, where the population continues to suffer atrocities.

The effects of the conflicts on the civilian population, including the Twa, have been devastating. In Burundi the conflict caused over 200,000 deaths, massive population displacement and destruction of the country’s infrastructure. In DRC, some three million people have died as a result of disease, hunger and horrific violence, including sexual violence against women, and also men.⁷ In the Ituri region a vicious conflict in which militias tried to exterminate whole tribes has caused over 50,000 deaths since 1999 and the displacement of



Twa dancing at Nyaruguru, Rwanda. Photo: Dorothy Jackson

over 500,000 people.⁸ Reports of abduction, cannibalism, rape, child rape, summary executions and torture were investigated and confirmed by the UN mission in DRC. The Mbuti “Pygmies” were one of the main groups subjected to summary executions, and testified that acts of cannibalism were committed against members of their families.⁹

The situation of Twa women

The problems that Twa communities face as an indigenous people, in particular the denial of their land rights and the ethnic discrimination they face, and the devastating consequences of living in an area battered by violent conflict, are problems experienced by both Twa men and Twa women. Twa women however, have the added burden of discrimination due to their gender and, in many instances, the problems faced by Twa in dealing with dominant society are even greater for Twa women.

Conflict

Like other women in the region, Twa women are very vulnerable in situations of violent conflict. The destruction of infrastructure such as health centres means that women’s reproductive health suffers: they cannot get prenatal health care and more women and babies die from giving birth at home. They are less able to protect their children from illness or to care for sick children. The destruction of schools means that women’s low educational attainments are further compromised. As in other ethnic groups, Twa women are the mainstay of the family’s economy¹⁰. The threat of attacks by belligerents stops them from going out to labour for others, or to work in their own fields, and their villages and fields are raided for food by armed groups. Livestock is pillaged, eroding any meagre capital that families have built up.

The conflict took away more than five people in my family. Some were disembowelled in the bushes where



Twa women at Nyaruhengeri, Rwanda. Photo: Dorothy Jackson

they had fled, and others were killed in the camps for displaced people. Now I am like a woman who has never had children ... The conflict had a terrible impact – it caused starvation, poverty. When we came back to the houses which we had fled, they had been stripped of everything. Our houses were burned, we roamed around aimlessly, we didn't know where to go... even our fields had been ravaged... Ever since then we are traumatised when we hear of more fighting. We have started development activities, but we can't do anything about the fact that our fields are on the edge of the marsh where the bandits hide, and which becomes a battlefield for the belligerents. Even though we have sown and planted, we don't harvest, as our crops are taken by belligerents.

Twa woman, Kigarama, Burundi

In DRC where violence is still rampant, particularly in the forest areas controlled by different armed gangs, women live in a constant climate of fear, frightened they will be held up by armed men seeking to sexually molest them or rape them, frightened even to go to market because of the numerous military check points where money is demanded of them, thus eroding any profits they make at the market. Girls are told to go to school in large groups to avoid being singled out for rape.

My little sister was ill and needed to go to the health centre. On the road she encountered some Katangais who had come out of the forest. When they saw her, they called her over. One of them said, "Take this money and buy cigarettes for me". She refused, saying that she was ill and needed to get to the health centre. The man said, "No, come here". He intimidated her, so she came immediately. He took her and put his gun down saying, "Today you will be my wife, and if you dare to refuse you'll see the consequences". Then he raped her. Twa woman, Iusi/Kalehe, DRC

Boys and men are less intimidated by the militia. Although they of course are also at risk of being killed, they can cross military barriers with fewer problems and are less at risk of sexual violence. Years of efforts by women's rights NGOs to promote women's empowerment have been undermined by the upsurge in male violence against women in the conflict zones.

Conflict and AIDS

The horrific sexual violence inflicted on women of all ethnic groups has increased HIV infection rates in the region.¹¹ Raped Twa women are often ostracised by their communities who fear that they are infected with HIV,¹² and the women are not confident enough to take legal action against their aggressors. The Bukavu-based Twa women's organisation UEFA (Union des Femmes Autochtones) has begun a programme to document sexual

violence against Twa women, provide counselling and reconciliation of fractured families, and offer practical support for small-scale farming activities. There are no statistics for the levels of HIV infection among Twa men and Twa women. Twa communities are aware of the deadly nature of HIV/AIDS but many see it as a sickness affecting other ethnic groups, with whom they don't have much contact, and so are not at risk. In fact AIDS has already reached Twa communities.

Twa women are exposed to particular types of risk through the cultural practices of non-Twa groups. Twa women's low or non-existent bride price means that non-Twa men can acquire Twa women at little cost.¹³ In many cases these relationships are liaisons of sexual convenience for non-Twa. The Twa wife may find that her man does not provide for the family's upkeep, and she is scorned by his community, and so eventually returns with her children to her own community, possibly infected with HIV. A widespread belief among dominant groups in the region is that sleeping with a Twa woman will cure a man of backache. A variant of this belief is that sex with a Twa woman protects against HIV/AIDS. Whether these are genuine beliefs or excuses for casual sex on "medical" grounds, such practices further increase the risks of HIV infection among Twa women.

Bakiga like to sleep with Batwa girls. They may meet in a bar, and end up having sex, they just use them, don't marry them. Sometimes, even if he has AIDS the Bakiga thinks, "I am sick anyway, let me give it to another person". Twa male youth, Rubuguri, Uganda

Land

There is very little published information about Twa peoples' customary land rights in areas where they have access to forests. However, it is probable that they have or had similar systems to other central African forest-based hunter-gatherers. These peoples consider themselves to be in an intimate, nurturing relationship with the forest, and cannot conceive of individual ownership of land. People are free to use the natural resources they need, and can hunt and gather over wide areas to which they have access through their membership in clans, and relationships through marriage and friendship. Women can access forest resources freely, and independent of their relationships with men.

The Twa that have lost their forest lands and now live on the margins of the dominant society have land tenure systems that resemble those of neighbouring farming and herding peoples, in which land is held through membership in clans, but through the male line only. Thus, in non-forest Twa communities, men are considered to be the owners of family plots. The convention is that Twa sons inherit the land from their fathers, and divorced or widowed Twa women can be evicted from the family land.

However, in practice there is considerable variation in Twa women's ability to control family property and it seems that the customary laws may be interpreted more flexibly in favour of women than in non-Twa communities.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the poor land security of the Twa as a whole is even worse for Twa women, as they have fewer rights to land than Twa men under individual property rights regimes, and their rights are weaker than under the forest-based communal land tenure systems that the Twa probably had previously. As land reform and distribution programmes become implemented in the areas where Twa live, the risk is that legalising land titles will exacerbate this trend by vesting formal ownership in the husband, thus strengthening his power to manage the land as he wants or to dispose of land unilaterally, unless specific measures to safeguard women's land security are implemented or innovative collective property rights systems are developed.

Legal protection for women's land rights

In Rwanda and Uganda, new inheritance laws protect women's rights to inherit land, to remain in the family home after the death of the husband and to have more equitable rights to the children, providing their marriages are legally registered. In Uganda, this includes customary marriage. These provisions could increase Twa women's land security, but very few of them are legally married at present.

Generally Twa couples have "serial monogamous" marriage patterns, in which partners meet, live together for a while, and then separate; both men and women are free to choose new spouses. Such relationships are quite common among hunter-gatherers and reflect the relatively egalitarian gender relations in these groups, which accept the right of women to make their own choices about relationships. This contrasts with societies where women are controlled by men and forced by societal norms and laws to remain in abusive relationships.¹⁵

Twa society has several positive aspects for Twa women. Parents value daughters and sons equally. Twa women are not controlled by their fathers or uncles, can generally choose their marriage partners (except in the relatively rare cases of abduction), and have the right to leave their husbands if they wish. Women control how they spend the money they earn, and some manage their husband's earnings too. Their husbands generally value their wives' role as the mainstay of the family's subsistence economy, and the division of labour between men and women is quite complementary. Within their communities, Twa women are outspoken and play a prominent role in decision-making. However, all is not perfect in Twa society: women suffer emotional and physical damage as a result of their husbands' alcohol abuse¹⁶ (a phenomenon that is disturbingly widespread in many indigenous societies that are facing cultural collapse),

they intensely dislike being in polygamous marriages (few Twa men can in fact afford to take on more than one wife), and their land rights are becoming weaker than men's.

Given the egalitarian elements that already exist in Twa society, it would be valuable to consult with Twa communities to find out whether civil marriage is the best way to empower Twa women in their marital relationships and protect their rights to land and property. For example, it could be more difficult or expensive for a Twa wife to end an abusive relationship if she is legally married. There may also be traditional Twa institutions and customs that can be strengthened to protect women's rights, while validating Twa culture.

Participation in civil society

The discrimination that the Twa have experienced from other ethnic groups in all aspects of their lives has contributed to their strong sense of exclusion and their feeling that their participation in civil society is not welcomed. The Twa live in their own communities, separate from the settlements of other ethnic groups. In the few instances where Twa and non-Twa live interspersed, such as in the planned villages (*Imidugudu*) in Rwanda, there are often tensions because non-Twa object to the lifestyle of the Twa, for example, the smoke from the firing of their pots. Twa may be arrested by local officials on arbitrary accusations of theft, damage to crops and even rape by their neighbours, and they are routinely paid less than non-Twa for agricultural wage labour. Alcohol abuse, poverty and feelings of alienation from society can encourage Twa men, especially youths, into delinquency, which only increases the mistrust of other ethnic groups.

We have conflicts [with non-Twa] around land. We are claiming the land of our ancestors which has been taken by the Hutu. We have lodged a complaint with the [provincial] governor. When we greet and are greeted by our neighbours it's superficial... really we don't understand each other's cultures and our way of expressing ourselves. When we fled and sought refuge [from the conflict] with our close neighbours, even they drove us away saying that we had come to steal from them. Recently, a Mutwa bought a new wrap for his wife. She was arrested when she went to the market on the grounds that she could not have bought this wrap herself, she must have stolen it. Since we started development activities [our neighbours] are jealous. That's why they enter our fields to ravage everything we have planted. If they behave like this without consideration to us, it shows the differences between us, the marginalisation and discrimination they impose on us, and the bad relations which should not exist. If they can't respect our property, and we can't help each other mutually, we cannot say there are good relations between them and us. We live

like that – like cats and dogs. Twa woman, Kigarama, Burundi.

Twa women's participation in civil society is still very limited. Very few are members of local women's groups. In Rwanda and Uganda, progressive pro-women policies are being implemented by government and NGOs, but with virtually no input from Twa women, who remain largely ignorant of women's support programmes. Little effort is made to ensure that such initiatives reach Twa women, and there is no monitoring of which ethnic groups use women's support services. Twa women are less likely than Twa men to attend meetings organised by local authorities because of their family responsibilities, and because they lack confidence to express their views outside their own communities. In many cases, Twa women's main source of support is from the Twa NGOs and support organisations that visit their communities and provide training and information.

There are no Twa in higher political positions within government, except in Burundi where power-sharing agreements underpinning the 2000 Arusha peace accord provide for three Twa senators. One was killed in an ambush, leaving two of the seats occupied, one of them by a Twa woman. Burundi is also unique in having a female Twa MP, Mme Libérate Nicayenzi, who was co-opted to this position when her Twa husband, also an MP, was murdered. Rwanda's new constitution provides for eight places in the senate for "representatives of historically marginalised communities". There is no doubt the Twa fulfil this criterion, but of the four senators so far appointed none are Twa.

Very few Twa are represented in local government and community administrative structures in the region, because of their reticence in putting themselves forward for selection. They feel that their illiteracy and poor clothing, and ethnic stereotypes that the Twa are unable to keep confidential information, will make others reject them as leaders and ignore their views.¹⁷ Some Rwandan Twa communities have even chosen a non-Twa as their *nyumbakumi*, the person who is the spokesperson for 10 households. It is very rare for Twa to have decision-making powers over mixed ethnic constituencies. These obstacles are even harder for Twa women to overcome. However, with the encouragement of Twa organisations and support NGOs more Twa, including women, are beginning to put themselves forward for positions in the wider community. Young widows, divorcees and single women seem to be more willing to take on these roles perhaps because they are used to fending for themselves.

I am a member of the women's council on my colline [next highest administrative unit above the cell] composed only of Twa. I am also on a council composed of Hutu, Tutsi and Twa ... I am in a mixed choir and I direct a group of women singers. The men who gave me this responsibility appreciate my ability. I try to reconcile

conflicts. I try to separate quarrelling husbands and wives, when others may not be able to. Twa widow, Gitega, Burundi

Raising Twa educational levels would contribute to Twa women's empowerment by increasing their self-confidence and countering negative perceptions by other ethnic groups. Twa primary school attendance is much lower than that of the national population; for example, in Rwanda the net primary enrolment rate is 48% for Twa children compared with 73% nationally.¹⁸ At secondary school, Twa girls' attendance drops off dramatically as families' scarce resources are invested in boys; there are no Twa girls at university. Twa literacy rates are much lower than the national population (28% versus 73% in Burundi, 23% versus 77% in Rwanda¹⁹), and Twa women are less literate than men. Twa women are enthusiastic participants in literacy classes. Their reasons for learning are related to having control over their affairs and increasing their status, rather than acquiring written knowledge - they want to be able to read information signs and avoid being mocked by others for using the wrong door, for example, and also to be able to read private letters without recourse to an intermediary.

Twa organisations

The Twa have set up 11 active NGOs and community-based organisations in the region, running projects in education, income generation and health, gathering data on the Twa situation, providing Twa communities with information, and advocating for Twa rights. In the field, these organisations work mostly through community associations - groups of Twa who work together on specific activities and pool any earnings in a common fund. Twa women outnumber men among the beneficiaries. The associations usually chose women as treasurers because they are more reliable than men in handling money, but men are usually chosen for the highest-ranking position of president.

This pattern is repeated in the Twa organisations. Except in the one organisation that specifically addresses women's issues, men tend to hold positions as managers and spokespersons, while women have lower ranking positions as secretaries and coordinators of projects seen as applying particularly to women and children, such as health and education work. Twa organisations make efforts to recruit equal numbers of male and female field workers and community volunteers, but males are more numerous. These disparities may be difficult to avoid, given Twa women's lower levels of education and family responsibilities that make it harder for them to do field work, but gender stereotyping seems to be involved as well.

As yet the Twa organisations have few programmes specifically addressing Twa women's marginalisation in

civil society as well as within their own communities and organisations. This is understandable given that few of the staff members of Twa organisations have received gender training and links with women's rights organisations, who could inform the Twa organisations about more radical approaches, are just beginning to be developed.

Conclusion

The main problems faced by Twa women arise from the political, social and economic marginalisation of the Twa as an ethnic group, resulting in landlessness, poverty and exclusion from society. As women, they are also more vulnerable in conflict situations, have weaker land rights and participate less in public life than men. Within Twa society, women have many freedoms but suffer particularly from family neglect and domestic violence resulting from their husbands' alcohol abuse.

Efforts to improve the situation of Twa women in the Great Lakes countries are currently being made through the Twa movement, rather than the women's rights movement. Both are dynamic movements committed to the support of their respective constituencies. Collaboration between them, both at national and local levels, would dramatically improve the prospects for Twa women. □

Notes

- 1 This paper does not cover those hunter-gatherer groups in other parts of DRC who are also known as Twa. Population estimates comprise an estimated 30,000-40,000 in Burundi, 16, 000 in DRC (Lewis 2000.), 3,500-4,000 in Uganda (Jackson 2003) and 33,000 in Rwanda (CAURWA 2004a).
- 2 Barume 2000; Jackson 2003; Kenrick and Lewis 2001; Lewis and Knight 1995; Lewis 2000; Woodburn 1997.
- 3 Jackson 2003: 6; Nkurunziza 2002: 73-75; CAURWA 2004b.
- 4 CAURWA, 2003.
- 5 CAURWA, 2003.
- 6 United Nations Security Council, Document no. S/2002/1146.
- 7 United Nations Security Council 2002; The Economist 2004: 8-9.
- 8 Human Rights Watch, Ituri, 2003.
- 9 IRIN, 15 January 2003; IRIN, 28 January 2003.; Human Rights Watch, 2003; CAMV 2003.
- 10 Jackson 2003: 9 -10.
- 11 IRIN, 10 July 2002.
- 12 Jackson 2003: 15
- 13 In contrast, marriages between Twa men and non-Twa women are only common among urban, educated Twa men, who can afford the bride price for non-Twa women.
- 14 Jackson 2003: 7-8
- 15 Jerome Lewis, personal communication, August 2003
- 16 Jackson, 2003: 11-13
- 17 Nkurunziza 2002: 84-96, and 113
- 18 CAURWA 2004. The enrolment rates are likely to be lower in Burundi and DRC where educational systems are severely disrupted, but possibly higher in Uganda, due to the introduction of free primary education.
- 19 Nkurunziza 2002: 63, CAURWA 2004.

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FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION



Naomi Kipuri

Introduction

Female Genital Mutilation is the current term for what used to be called "female circumcision". The latter term tended to equate the practice with the circumcision of males, which seems to have no adverse effects upon those who undergo the operation and remains a significant rite of passage in many communities.

A rite of passage

Many ethnic groups in Kenya, as in other parts of Africa, know both male and female circumcision. According to the demographic Health Survey 1998, more than 55% of Kenyan communities still practise it. While accurate statistics are not available, a survey carried out by Maendeleo ya Wanawake indicates that, among the Samburu community, over 95% practise FGM. This seems to tally with actual observation among the majority of indigenous communities. In communities where the practice is popular, the operation is carried out as part of a rite of passage during adolescence, to mark the end of childhood and to usher in adulthood. Preparations for the ritual last many months and involve the whole community. For men it involves the removal of all or part of the foreskin as the candidate displays bravery by not flinching throughout the operation. Bravery is valued since the young men would then be expected to take charge of all the community's security requirements until other young men are initiated to take their place. For men, the rite has remained part of an elaborate ritual involving instruction in relevant issues for an adult of a given community.

Girls, on the other hand, are not expected to be as brave as warriors. The operation can be as minor as cutting off a small part of the tip of the clitoris, or quite major to the extent that the entire clitoris as well as other outer parts of the vagina are cut off. Once they have recovered from the operation, the girls are prepared for marriage.

Among communities where the operation is performed at childhood, boys are often circumcised when they are only a few days old (usually 8) while girls are operated at the age of about eight years.

As a rite of passage, male circumcision is still perceived as a positive and necessary



part of living cultures. However, this is no longer true of female circumcision. While men spend months, and sometimes years, receiving instruction in adult behaviour, all that is left for the girl is a mere cut before she is bundled off to a husband or left to continue her schooling, perhaps among age-mates for whom the operation is but an embarrassment. It is also noted that in cases where the girls who undergo the operation are in a minority, the shame causes some of them to drop out of school and opt for early marriage.

Why certain communities practise FGM

In the East African region, FGM is justified from a number of perspectives:

- Some communities argue that it is a necessary rite of passage into womanhood. They do not see any other way of marking the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood;
- It ensures cleanliness;
- It offers better prospects for marriage;
- It widens the birth canal;

- It prevents promiscuity and excessive clitoral growth;
- It preserves virginity for those who insist on virginity before marriage.

History of FGM

Female circumcision has always been perceived negatively as a "savage" practice by outsiders. This has been true from the colonial period through to the present. However, for many years before and after colonialism, the practice continued among Kenyan communities with little hindrance. Since the colonial government offered little or no public education, it was only the missionaries and churches that could be said to have done some awareness raising around the practice. It was thus they who first began campaigns against the practice among their followers.

Missionary churches banned it, and excommunicated African members who perpetuated the practice. In many cases, church membership dropped drastically when declarations of loyalty were instituted within their congregation against the rite. Among the Maasai, the Anglican and Presbyterian Churches denied Holy Communion to those of their members who allowed their daughters to undergo female circumcision, as it was referred to in those days. On a general level, it was reported that most Protestants opposed FGM while the majority of Catholics and Muslims chose not to interfere with the non-spiritual aspects of their followers.

African communities also defied some rules and moves against FGM because they saw them as a wider scheme by the colonizers to control and oppress them. In this respect, attempts (particularly by the government but also by religious organizations) to stamp out the practice simply resulted in the popularisation of the rite among communities that practised it.

Another reason for its popularisation during the fight for independence was that the rite was a requirement for membership of some African Associations, where the uncircumcised were seen as anti-freedom. After independence, there was little talk of eradicating the circumcision of girls. This was probably because the first President of the Republic saw it as a politically sensitive issue and so he adopted a policy of "say nothing do nothing".

Since everyone went through the rite in those days, the few who did not were initially shunned by the community and they found it difficult to attract marriage partners. In other instances, those who had avoided it earlier were later circumcised at marriage or during the delivery of their first baby. This was because, in societies that observe the rite, in symbolic terms to become a mother a woman first has to be initiated into adulthood through circumcision. Women were also hesitant to give it up because of the strict penalties imposed on defaulters by various communities. In a community where circumcision was

the order of the day, girls who refused to undergo the ritual became outcasts.

Throughout the colonial period and the early years after independence, therefore, all the campaigns against FGM were ineffective for several reasons:

- Where the churches restricted their followers from church attendance, they simply ignored it and went to church whenever they felt like it because they never took church teachings seriously;
- In some cases, women from communities that did not observe the practice were the ones employed to campaign against the practice; the campaign was not very effective because they were perceived as being ignorant about other people's cultures;
- In cases where public pronouncements were made as directives against the practice, they were similarly ineffective. A case in point was when the former President warned against the practice in his own home district of Baringo. The response was that the incidence of girls undergoing the operation simply shot up. The reaction of most people was that the President could rule the country but should not interfere with what goes on inside people's own households.

In those early years, FGM was seen as a private affair. Age mates would talk of occurrences using circumcision dates as reference points: "*It happened the year we were circumcised.*"

The real impetus for the movement against FGM was propelled into the national limelight when President Moi started to speak against practices such as early marriage and female circumcision. He also allowed movements opposed to the rite to operate freely. During one of his tours in Baringo District in 1982, he said that if anyone was heard of or caught circumcising girls in that district "*he will be on fire*". Unfortunately, it was not until late 2001 that the practice was legally criminalized through parliament, when an Act was passed banning it.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has also classified FGM as a form of violence against girls and women since it has serious physical and psychological effects. Kenya was among ten African countries to receive technical and financial assistance from the WHO for the eradication of FGM. Since then, the country has shown tremendous progress towards realising this goal. The government, NGOs and women's organizations have all made efforts to raise public awareness of the dangers of FGM. Church-based organizations such the National Council of Churches (NCCCK), World Vision International (Kenya) and others have also intensified their campaign against the practice.

FGM has been widely criticized by women leaders and other national organisations that state that it is a violation of women's rights as it exposes them to physical and psychological torture.



Countries in Africa where FGM is practiced



Pastoralist areas where FGM is still practiced. Photos: Marianne Wiben Jensen

FGM as a Health issue

The health aspect of the operation has been more recently re-examined.

Circumcision was usually performed by old women using old knives that were not sterilised and with no anaesthetic. The severity of the operation depends on the type of procedure. Type one consists of cutting off the tip of the clitoris. Type two involves removing the clitoris or even the entire clitoris plus the labia minora (the adjacent tissues sometimes referred to as the inner lips). Type three is called infibulation or pharaonic operation and it involves the removal of the clitoris, labia minora and labia majora (the outer lips) and the raw edges are then sewn together leaving only a tiny opening for urination and menstruation flow. Type four, which is rarely practised now, involves enlarging the vaginal opening by cutting the perineum.

Short-term health effects such as haemorrhage, shock, pain and various risks of infection including tetanus, hepatitis and AIDS have come to be associated with this operation. Deaths due to the unhygienic conditions during the operation have also been reported. At the same time, long-term effects of FGM have been recounted, one of which is difficulty and pain during labour as well as the tearing of muscles during delivery. On top of all this, from a human rights perspective, the girls who undergo the operation have recently been portrayed as victims whose rights are being violated since the rite is carried out against their wishes or without the girls being provided with adequate information as to the side effects or possible dangers of the operation. In this way, pressure has been exerted to reduce the incidence of this rite or to stop it altogether. But whereas other aspects of culture are fast changing and some are being shunned altogether, even the severity of the cut has remained in this case. From this perspective, the rite is increasingly being perceived as a relic of culture that must be done away with.

Legislation against FGM

While other control measures have continued against FGM, there has always been a feeling that legislation was the only way in which government could demonstrate its commitment against the practice. According to the Parliamentary Bill, those who practice female genital mutilation and those who marry off under-age children risk stiff penalties and will face a 12-month jail term or a Ksh 50,000 fine or both if convicted. The penalty is faced by those convicted of FGM and child marriages as well as by those who deny their children an education.

At the turn of the new century, lawmakers, civil society, the government and other pressure groups began to push for action on the part of government to stamp out the practice of FGM. A parliamentary motion drafted by a male legislator calling for the abolition of the practice in

all its forms failed to pass through Parliament the first time it was introduced because legislators from communities condoning the practice did not support it. Their hands tied by fear of scandalising their constituents, politicians supported the continued existence of this practice in a most vocal manner.

Many of the parliamentarians who opposed the motion were from indigenous pastoralist communities who are socio-economically and politically marginalized and are still tenaciously clinging to their cultures, despite Western onslaughts. These areas are furthermore remote with poor infrastructure. After a lot of discussion, however, the motion was eventually passed in 2001.

Despite all the discussions, pressure and legislation, the incidences of female circumcisions have been rising in some districts, including Nyamira, Kissi, Meru Samburu, Transmara, Narok and Kajiado. A combination of factors may be responsible for this. There has been an increased need for people to assert their identity and be proud of being different as a reaction against a move toward uniformity on the part of the state. It has also been observed that the UN Decade for the World's Indigenous Peoples has given indigenous peoples the confidence to come out and be counted as different. This difference means re-asserting cultural differences, of which circumcision is an integral part. Another possible reason is that there are increasing incidents of adolescent pregnancies, alcohol abuse, rebellion among teenagers and other habits that parents perceive as anti-social behaviour, and these make some indigenous parents (who would otherwise have abandoned the practice) feel that a return to culture would instil discipline in their children. The secretary of the League of Kenyan Women criticised fellow women who forced their daughters into it. The former MP said, "*The practice is harmful and the Kisii community has no choice but to discard it*".

Much criticism is also heard in Meru District: elders condemned an incident in which a woman in Meru North District was forced to circumcise herself, to appease her in-laws. The mother of one mutilated herself to save her marriage after her husband abandoned her for not being circumcised. The elders urged the Meru community to discard the outdated practice. Some communities in the area have insisted on FGM as a sign of womanhood while the chairman of the Council of Elders asked the Meru to discard FGM saying, "*It is retrogressive and harmful to the development of the girl-child and the community*". In the same vein, police arrested a woman who circumcised a diabetic schoolgirl, who later bled to death in hospital. The woman was charged with murder. Another incident is that of a man who beat up his 13-year-old daughter for refusing to be circumcised. The provincial administration is always warning residents against violating children's rights, adding that the government will punish such people.

However, in Marakwet District (which is predominantly occupied by the Kalenjin community), statisti-

cally, fewer girls are now being circumcised. A non-governmental organisation spearheading the campaign against female genital mutilation in the area said, "The number of girls undergoing the rite has declined by more than 50 % over the previous year". Marakwet Women and Girls project co-ordinator said, "Less than 100 girls were circumcised this season compared to more than 300 the same season in the past". She attributed the decline to intensive campaigning against the practice by non-governmental organisations operating in the area. Her organisation had rescued more than 70 girls from forced circumcision, the majority of whom had now undergone an alternative rite of passage. She says, "Reduced incidents of FGM in Kerio Valley have been achieved through the joint efforts of my organisation, World Vision, SNV and other organisations".

The alternative rite

While there have been enough reasons against continuing FGM, the difficulty has remained as to how to discontinue the age-old practice when nothing has been developed to replace it. Because the rite is deeply rooted in some communities, to suddenly abandon it altogether has proved difficult in many cases. For this reason, some groups have experimented with various ways of easing it in socially acceptable ways. One of the methods initiated among the Meru has been referred to as an alternative rite of passage or an Intellectual Female Initiation (IFI). This rite has since spread to other parts of the country. Many girls have opted to undergo an alternative rite of passage, which includes training in HIV/AIDS, nutrition, home economics, child rights, hygiene, career choice, the disadvantages of female genital mutilation and changes in cultural trends. More than 1,000 girls from Tunyo, Tot and Tirap divisions of Marakwet District have also (like the Meru) benefited from the programme, which was initiated four years ago. There is a great potential for this alternative rite to be replicated among other communities. The main problem is that the small grassroots organizations who might have more impact usually do not have the means, and those who have the means are not always acceptable.

Difficulties encountered in discontinuing FGM

One of the reasons why it has become difficult to eradicate FGM is because it has deeply held cultural values attached to it. Again, the practice is carried out in remote areas where, even if policing were done, accessibility would still remain a major hindrance. For example, no major intervention has taken place in Samburu District to curb the practice. The few organisations in the district that are fighting the practice are ill equipped both financially and in terms of human resources. Failure to report FGM

incidents has also made the fight against the practice ineffective in legal terms. The chairperson of the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) urged Kenyan leaders and especially men to speak out against FGM. "If our leaders stopped shying away from speaking against the vice, the fight against it would have been more fruitful," she said.

Conclusion

From the above, it is clear that attempting to eradicate FGM in Kenya has been a challenging task. Many lessons have been learnt through these efforts. While legislating against the practice has achieved some positive results, it has also proved that the forces of the law cannot be relied upon per se to change a community's way of life and thinking. It has also been seen that, in cases where too much force and pressure has been exerted, the practice goes underground and is performed in secret. Since many of the girls are young, they may not know how to seek assistance and by the time they know they could, it is too late. It must therefore be seen as only a first step in a series of actions to discourage the practice. At the same time, it has become apparent that constant pressure and persuasion need to be applied continuously by all stakeholders until success has been achieved.

As the Minister for Health once put it, "Diplomacy is still the best approach and we must rely on the goodwill of the communities practicing FGM to want to discard it". It is true that the rite is still a culturally bound affair and because of this it is the cultures and beliefs of people that need to be influenced in order to reduce the incidence of FGM.

In the final analysis, it has been proved that the initiatives of women from communities that practise FGM have been sustainable in helping to disseminate the right messages in culturally appropriate ways. Such initiatives are bound to bear fruit and ought to be supported.

As discussions continue, the rite ceases to be a strictly private affair. Nowadays it is being discussed openly, analysed and its relevance in modern society questioned. As this happens, the discussions, often couched in criticism, have tended to influence some potential candidates to resist attempts to have them undergo the operation no matter how significant it is in their respective communities. □

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TAMACHEK WOMEN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Saoudata Aboubacrine





Parade in traditional costume at the Essakan Desert Festival, Timbuktu. Photo: Incomindios

Throughout North and West Africa, the Touareg (who also call themselves Tamachek) have long been confronted by enormous socio-economic, legal and political barriers. They are often deprived of their fundamental rights and freedoms and are among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable peoples on the planet. They have lost control over most of their ancestral lands, have little or no say in decisions affecting them and are subject to projects and decisions that are ill-adapted to their needs or even harmful to their health, economic, social and cultural life. The conditions of the Touareg people are experienced all the more acutely by Tamachek women.

The traditional situation of Tamachek women

Women are traditionally the guardians of culture and the guarantors of the community's unity and honour. They learn very early on to choose their words wisely and to consider their options carefully because a decision will generally be imposed on them when consensus cannot be reached. Young girls may receive several suitors.

Monogamy is the rule, even if it is common to remarry, and nomadic life - where famine follows abundance - prohibits large families. The woman reigns over the universe of the tent and, in cases of divorce, it is often the man who is forced to leave, not the woman. The bearer of knowledge, she instils society's values in her children from a very early age, teaching them music, poetry, writing and divination. When the men used to be away for long periods of time, grazing their animals, trading or waging war, it was the women who were the guardians of culture and tradition in the camps.

Separate ownership of goods is the only matrimonial system recognised among the Touareg, although a number of common goods are allocated to household needs. It is quite clear that in all cases, even if the husband is formally head of the household, decisions are taken jointly.

In economic terms, the woman owns her own assets, and she enjoys these freely without anyone (father, brother or husband) questioning this. Throughout her married life, the Touareg woman collects valu-

able jewellery, to be passed on exclusively to her daughter or daughters.

Once married, the woman continues to manage her dowry, which she retains in case of divorce. It should, however, be noted that divorced women are granted no alimony. This is awarded to young children, only when the mother does not have the means to provide for them herself. Moreover, custom has it that if the marriage breaks down, custody of the children will be divided according to their sex or by agreement. It is generally the father who has custody of the boys, and the mother of the girls. The children's interest would appear to be taken into account. The father will take responsibility for his sons' education while the mother will ensure that her daughters are given a "model" education. Visiting rights are inviolable and it is not uncommon to see one or other parent making a lengthy stay in the camp where their children are living in the custody of his or her ex-spouse.

Tamachek women today

Tamachek (or Touareg) women today find themselves at the crossroads of history consisting of three paths: that of a mythical past, that of a troubled and disrupted present and, finally, that of an uncertain future.

If one does not take care to avoid this, there is a great temptation to continue to

(left) Saoudata and Mary Simat (Ipacc Vice-President) at the Ipacc Executive Committee meeting in Ouagadougou, February 2004. Photo: Ipacc



In the Tin Hinan tent at the Essakan Desert Festival, Saoudata coordinates activities (cultural, and the promotion and dissemination of human and indigenous people's rights). Photo: Incomindios

hold women up as the guardians of outmoded tradition, placing them on a pedestal in order to keep them in check so that they remain the required paragon of virtue. Subtly or unconsciously, Tamachek women are being drawn into an unclear game on the pretence of an ambiguous preservation of tradition. They have lost their customs, and their present reality is such that they can no longer position themselves in relation to so many modern changes. They have obligations within society but the conditions for fulfilling these obligations are not met. They have, for example, a duty to provide for their family but very often do not have the economic resources to do so. Tradition has it that women are generous, receptive, welcoming, and available to receive visitors or help family members. But it is extremely difficult to maintain these good values when the environment of the past, with all its means and possibilities, no longer exists, either in a settled location or even in most of the camps.

Analysing the causes

The problems facing Tamachek women are due to various factors, the roots of which can be traced back to colonisation and decolonisation, which caused remarkable disruption to the Touareg way of life in general and women's status in particular.

During colonisation, men - if not entire families - were massacred or deported, often leaving the women to run their families on their own. Decolonisation failed to take account of the Touareg's traditional organisation and way of life. On the contrary, a new and totally foreign way of life was imposed on them. This is why the education system, for example, the basis of development for any people, failed completely in the Tamachek environment. It failed to correspond to their reality in any way.

The traditionally "privileged" position of Tamachek women also changed. Harmful customs that put women's development dangerously at risk in an increasingly male-dominated society should not be overlooked: early, often forced and frequently endogamous marriage, medically unassisted childbirth, a lack of family planning knowledge and an absence of sex education or information on reproductive health issues, prohibitive dowries, frequent divorces and common repudiations, and a failure to educate girls. All these were factors in the marginalisation of Touareg women.

The difficulties these women experience today are also linked to imbalances that have arisen within society following the numerous conflicts of the last few years between armed Touareg movements and some Sahelian states, along with measles, meningitis and cholera epidemics, and the years of drought that ravaged the Sahel and the Sahara. All these factors have had a direct impact on women's situation: many have found themselves alone with dependant children. Others have been forced into exile, and live in refugee camps or shanty towns around the cities, where they do not have the means to provide for their families. Such is the case, for example, of the women of Dapoya in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), Touareg women who survive by working as guards on building sites and from handicrafts etc.

Meeting with and living alongside other cultures does not necessarily promote the position of women, and leads both women and men to believe that the behaviour of others is best. This encourages men into polygamy and women into accepting it. They begin to think that, to be a good mother, they must be extremely obliging to their husband. There are even rare cases of girls being circumcised through the influence of neighbours who traditionally carry out this practice. To this must be added increased illiteracy due to the very low level of school registration among women, and the fact that they are



The IPACC delegation being welcomed by members of Tin Hinan, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Photo: IPACC

ignorant of their most basic rights. Even when they are aware of their rights, a kind of cultural modesty prevents them from claiming these rights through the justice system. Another problem is a lack of supervision, awareness raising, information, education and organisation, all factors that hinder the socio-economic development and promotion of Touareg women.

Development partners are not sufficiently interested in women's problems. Development projects often have either insufficient information to understand the women's situation or they underestimate their difficulties. In fact, interventions on women's behalf are virtually non-existent, and projects are often badly adapted to their needs. Because of this they do not form a focus of interest for the women they are supposed to benefit.

At national and local decision-making levels, the women have no voice: at national level, they are absent from state institutions and, consequently, forgotten. At local level, it is the men who are present in all decision-making spheres (municipalities, commune, etc.).

Solutions and Prospects

Despite all the difficulties encountered by Touareg women – conflict, extreme poverty, exile - some of them have gained an awareness of their situation and have organised themselves into cooperatives, associations and networks in order to face up to the future. This awakening of conscience has come about through the process of adapting to their current life.

The Tin Hinan Association was born of this reality. It bases its action around human rights and, more specifically, the rights of women, youth and indigenous peoples. Tin Hanan's strategy has been to support the dynamics of change and mobilisation around issues of human rights education and promotion, girls' education, train-

ing, literacy, creating means of existence, improving health conditions etc.

Along with other organisations set up by Touareg women, such as Tounfa, Tidawt etc., and women's organisations among other indigenous peoples in Africa (Maasai, Batwa, San, Mbororo, Pokot, etc.), Tin Hinan was involved in establishing AIWO (the African Indigenous Women's Organisation) in April 1998. The aim of this organisation is to defend and promote the human rights and interests of women and indigenous peoples in Africa.

Despite dynamic indigenous female leadership within these organisations, the women leaders have come up against a number of problems: the weight of culture, unequal opportunities, lack of recognition of some of their rights, illiteracy, etc. There are many barriers and prejudices against which the women have to fight to become more effective in their daily struggle. It is, however, essential that indigenous women's organisations participate effectively to promote and protect their rights, in the direct interest of their families, their communities, their country and all humanity. The aspiration to respect human rights in general, and those of women and indigenous peoples in particular, cannot become a reality without their involvement. This implies a need to strengthen their organisations' and networks' capacities at all levels so that women can overcome the obstacles and prejudices in order to fulfil their potential and aspire to a happiness that is worthy of its name: the emancipation of all women. □

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INTERVIEW WITH NINA PACARI



Erica-Irene Daes and Nina Pacari (right).
Photo: Intl. Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development

A social and political science graduate, Dr. Nina Pacari Vega Conejo is also a lawyer with a doctorate in case law. She was the first indigenous woman Foreign Secretary of the Republic of Ecuador, having previously been a member of parliament, a member of the Public Management Committee and a member of the Council of the Legislature of the National Congress, plus second Vice-President of this latter. She was also the Chimborazo representative to the Constituent Assembly.

Prior to this she was National Executive Secretary of the National Council for Planning and Development for the Indigenous and Black Peoples of Ecuador, CONPLADEIN.

From 1993 to 1996, she was Lands and Territories officer for the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, CONAIE, having previously worked as their legal advisor. She has published a number of books and articles both nationally and internationally and has sat on various executive councils.

- 1. You were the first indigenous woman to hold the post of Foreign Secretary. You were also a member of the Assembly, a Member of Parliament and Vice-President of the Ecuadorian parliament. Would such appointments have been possible ten years ago?**

My involvement in politics was on the basis of a collective decision. And the essential justification behind that collective decision was the need to build a political project of inclusion and equality. During the indigenous uprising of June 1990, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador called nationally for the country to be re-established as an inclusive and plurinational state. At its Third National Congress in 1993, CONAIE decided that one of its strategies would be to achieve a presence in

national political life and, hence, “to participate in future electoral processes, creating the prior conditions” for economic, cultural and political development in line with the reality and needs of Ecuadorians. In 1994, in accordance with these decisions, the Confederation presented a package of constitutional reforms to the National Congress with the aim of achieving the approval of laws enabling indigenous peoples to be directly represented in the Ecuadorian parliament. This proposal was rejected by Congress but a constitutional reform permitting “the participation of independents” in electoral processes, under the banner of political parties or movements or not, was introduced. This constitutional amendment enabled the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador – along with other organised sectors of the urban social movement – to trace the broad outlines of a political movement that became known as the Pachakutik Movement for Plurinational Unity-New Country (*Movimiento de Unidad Plurinacional Pachakutik-Nuevo País*). This movement participated in elections for the first time in 1996. As a result, various indigenous mayors were elected, for example in Cotacachi (Imbabura) and Guamote (Chimborazo) and, for the first time, an indigenous woman was elected Mayoress of Suscal (Cañar). Five indigenous legislators were also elected (two from the Amazon and three from the Sierra). The 1998 elections marked the first time in Ecuador’s history that an indigenous woman was elected as a National Legislator.¹

It would have been extremely difficult for indigenous peoples, and particularly indigenous women, to become involved in national politics within a racist society had it not been for the project of political inclusion that we had been implementing via local government and the political spaces we were involved in. Through a process of struggle, progress was made throughout the 1990s and, during this time, the role of indigenous women became more visible. It became possible to enter them as candidates for different positions and entrust Executive responsibilities to them. Had it not been for this whole process of struggle, it would not have been possible to hold such important positions on an individual basis, and far less ten years ago.

- 2. How do you view the changes in Ecuadorian society in terms of indigenous women’s political participation?**

These changes have been largely dependant upon the role that indigenous women have played. This role must be analysed and understood within the context of the struggles of their peoples. The indigenous uprising of June 1990 was a determining factor. Indigenous peoples became publicly visible with proposals, or as different collective bodies. These expressions did not include only men or only women within them. Participation is on a community, a family, basis. The *ayllus* is present, that is, the mother, father, children, grandparents, community,

village. Each person has a particular responsibility within this action. But it is all of them as a group that will move Ecuador's political project in the right direction. In other words, it is for all of us (indigenous men and women) to strive for our dreams and achieve these objectives.

The possibilities offered by IT and media development meant that Ecuadorian society was able to witness women's involvement, and not only in the tasks traditionally allocated to them. Indigenous women were on the streets, standing "shoulder to shoulder" with their people, they were in leadership positions, and were also involved in discussions and dialogue with the government of the time.

Now, for the first time, indigenous peoples (and women as well) are able to see their own possibilities, capacities and potential. But they are also aware of their limitations. They know their problems will not be resolved by individual action. Solidarity from people who supported the demonstration enabled strategic alliances to be forged between the poor and the honest business sector. National proposals were beginning to be designed in which all sectors were identified. For example, the struggle for land and production now included a struggle for the food security of all Ecuadorians; the struggle for recognition of cultural ethnicity included gender and generational equality.

Through daily action, women were taking a firm role in leadership, whether through the Leadership Training School², run by women themselves, in local, provincial, regional or national leadership bodies, or via public administration responsibilities, having been duly elected. Gradually, Ecuadorian society has been gaining confidence in the individual roles being played by women, and in the collective roles being played by its peoples. It has been demonstrating greater openness. It is, however, clear that racism and gender discrimination have not yet been overcome.

3. What obstacles remain? Is there still discrimination?

In my opinion, I think the following four areas, although not exclusive, are important:

- Different cultural codes.
- Organisational structure of a state that is still exclusive.
- Economic situation.
- Lack of a consensual national political project.

a) Different Cultural Codes. The demands of indigenous peoples have led to progress in terms of constitutionally legislating for cultural diversity. These days, Ecuadorian society is theoretically defined as multicultural. However, in reality and in practice, this has yet to become concrete. It is rare to find issues of diversity or interculturality on the public policy agenda. Indigenous peoples are not perceived as being politically-minded or

as having the knowledge to contribute to national or universal thinking. Any analysis of the problems or demands of native peoples takes the logic of domination as its departure point, always reaffirming the rationality of the dominant force. This imposition of dominant cultural codes thus becomes a real obstacle to embracing the oppressed sectors. It is one of the daily battles being fought by the indigenous movement: to develop, disseminate and include our cultural codes in national Ecuadorian life.

b) Organisational Structure of a State that is still exclusive. The way the state is organised is not designed with a view to including an ethno-cultural approach. The few spaces that have been created are the product of the indigenous peoples' struggle, with no real support from central government being in place. To this lack of support must be added a lack of openness in terms of understanding, respecting and being receptive to the content of the proposals indigenous peoples make within these arenas. At national level, the lack of an ethno-cultural approach in public policy, in state projects and programmes, has also had an impact on the failure of what we understand as "co-existence in a multicultural society".

c) Economic Situation. Although indigenous peoples have managed to force their way onto the political scene, the economic situation continues to be a great obstacle, not only to the sustainability and development of their economies but also in terms of facing up to the requirements of the current electoral climate. Government concerns focus on the macro-economy, from which very few Ecuadorians benefit. Players in the micro and informal economies are not even considered in the statistics. This short-sighted vision leads governments to implement policies that benefit the same old people. This limited approach to economic policy prevents global and integrated actions from being taken. Indigenous peoples are recognised as social subjects but not as economic subjects, despite the fact that 64% of agricultural production on the national market is generated, along with small farmers, by this important sector of the population. If this limited approach to the economic reality is not overcome, it will remain an obstacle to redirecting social and infrastructural investment as well as to the creation of integrated development policies.

Given the indigenous experience in the elections from 1996 onwards, their intervention can be deemed as having been crucial. Along with indigenous women, this new political force has had to compete in elections alongside political parties who are really none other than electoral businesses, with huge financial resources but no social base. They have also had to overcome enormous discrimination. The great debate during colonial times may have focused on "whether the indigenous have souls or not", but the issue highlighted during the elections was "whether the indigenous were capable of public management or not". In the case of indigenous women, their triple

discrimination is reflected in their status as women, poor and indigenous. To overcome these barriers and break with these prejudices, the new players – particularly indigenous women – have had to manage ethically, with creativity and efficiency. And yet discrimination and racism still persist as tools of domination.

d) Lack of a consensual national political project. This is becoming one of the most serious and marked problems in Ecuador: the internal failure to recognise its diversity and the need to build a common agenda through dialogue. With the indigenous uprising of June 1990, for the first time in the country's history, CONAIE managed to force the government to dialogue with indigenous peoples, to understand and resolve their demands. Indigenous women's participation in those demonstrations, and in the ones that have subsequently taken place, has been absolute. In the road closures, the women were there with their young children, actively involved. However, their participation with "their children in their arms" was criticised by non-indigenous women. They did not understand that their struggle was approved by the *ayllu*, the community, that their struggle related to a life project.

4. In terms of the possibility of political participation, is there any difference between indigenous men and indigenous women, between indigenous and mestizo women?

I think I should briefly explain the legal context within which women's participation, indigenous or not, takes place in the electoral process. Article 102 of the Political Constitution expressly states that, "*The state will promote and guarantee the equal participation of women and men as candidates in the electoral process (...) and in political parties.*" In line with this constitutional provision, legislation was passed to provide for the gradual incorporation of women onto the party lists for participation in electoral processes. Hence, during the 2000 elections, the 30% list quota was achieved. During the 2002 elections it was 35% and it will continue to increase by 5% at each election until we have equal representation of 50%. A study carried out on indigenous women's candidacies for national-level parliamentary posts in 1998 revealed that the *Movimiento Pachakutik* put forward one indigenous woman in second position on their list and *Izquierda Democrática*, (the Democratic Left – of social democratic tendency) put another woman in twelfth place. As a result, this latter was unable to gain election during the four and a half years of the legislative period.³ This situation reveals that indigenous women's participation is still in its infancy, both within the "progressive" tendency and within the *Movimiento Pachakutik* itself. Some of the main reasons for this inequality are the following: 1) Male chauvinism, which prioritises male participation. 2) Women's fears. 3) Becoming involved in an unknown area.

Given that indigenous women's participation takes place within the context of a plural political movement in which non-indigenous players are also involved, a process of mutual learning has developed around various aspects, including the following three:

- Cultural codes, which both indigenous and non-indigenous players bear.
- The political project promoted by the political movement.
- The style of campaigning.

Cultural codes: the basic principles of good governance, such as *Ama Shua* (do not steal), *Ama Llulla* (do not lie) and *Ama Killa* (do not be lazy), are indigenous principles, in which indigenous men and women have played a leading role. *Mestizo* women actively involved in politics have taken these fully on board. Likewise it has been up to indigenous women to broaden the horizon to incorporate an inclusive proposal that encompasses non-indigenous society and thus non-indigenous women. It is clear that there have sometimes been tensions or discrimination. But this school of diversity within the political world has enabled us to mature and recognise our own strengths and weaknesses, and it has also given us a challenge: that of co-existing with a critical awareness, with an affirmation of our identity and the perspective of a common project.

The political project enables visions to be brought into alignment and common perspectives and objectives to be reached. This signifies a great step forward in the participation process, both for women and for new players in general.

The style of campaigning. In terms of relationships within the political movement, women's awareness raising (indigenous and mestizo) and the involvement of new players around a common objective, it has to be said that we have been filled with enthusiasm and hope. Regardless of the differences that exist, when a collective process is underway we are able to join together to form a fundamental basis for the exercise of interculturality. It is a fundamental part of the process of change. But it is during an election campaign that racism, discrimination and clientelism come to the fore on the part of candidates from rival political parties.

5. How do you assess your experience in power? What lessons have you learned, for yourself, for the indigenous movement and for indigenous women?

There is a great difference between power and government. It is at the local level, which is autonomous, that 96 indigenous authorities have managed to exercise power and participatory government with identity, described as *alternative*. For the first time in Ecuador and Latin America,

an indigenous woman was elected Mayoress in the canton of Suscal, province of Cañar, in the south of the country. Various women have also held public management responsibilities as elected councillors. Their form of management has been positive and is making a contribution to the country.

The same is taking place at parliamentary level. We have had indigenous legislators since 1996. During the 1998-2002 period, there was a female Kichua legislator. The legislative task of indigenous women has been highlighted and recognised by national society. The quality of indigenous women's public management has enabled a high degree of respectability to be granted to native peoples.

At national level, the electoral triumph of the *Pachakutik-Sociedad Patriótica* alliance enabled two indigenous leaders of great organisational experience to be placed in charge of the Ministries of Agriculture and Foreign Affairs. From a personal point of view, I can say that this was a very enriching and positive experience. Administrative handling of institutional affairs, management organisation, policy implementation, international cooperation, to name but a few, were all effective. Most of the disagreements with the President were rooted in the existence of two different visions of political and government action. This dichotomy was explicit in the understanding between the two political forces in government. In the end, it was not possible to implement the ten policy points agreed when the Alliance was formed, far less economic policy, and so the final break came on 6 August year?

Despite these difficulties, the balance has been a positive one, given that it has enabled us to discover the potential that exists and its limitations. In any case, it is important to note that, to make a political project concrete, it is not sufficient to hold ministries such as Agriculture and Foreign Affairs, however strategic. I believe this is one of the most fundamental lessons, all the more so if we consider that structural change has to take place over the short, medium and long term, always bearing in mind the urgency of the situation of poverty and exclusion.

6. What are the challenges for the coming years, in terms of participation?

Given the aspects addressed, I think we could highlight the following challenges:

- To fine-tune and agree on an inclusive political project.
- To build a state model that responds, through social inclusion, to the reality, needs and perspectives of the country.
- To implement an economic development that guarantees the well-being of all Ecuadorians.
- To exercise citizenship and interculturality.
- To put an end to racism and prejudice in order to strengthen trust and credibility.

7. You are defending a political project of inclusion and respect for diversity. Do you believe that indigenous women have (or could) achieve a new way of governing?

It is said that women are more sensitive to social issues. Personally, I think that the new players, including indigenous women, have devised a **Life Project**. And this project is not limited to the form of governing, particularly within the context of a structure that is not so favourable. Hence we must look not only at form but also at content. The policies that are being implemented, the State model that is being built or the type of development that is taking place, these are the essential points. So our great task is to build an integral vision that joins the economic with the social, the political with the cultural. This vision must not focus only on the macro-economy but also on the micro. Diversity must be taken as read. The fact that one is a woman or indigenous does not in itself guarantee good governance. It depends, fundamentally, on the political project, the life project.

8. What conditions are necessary for indigenous women to be able to play their role fully?

I think the following are fundamental:

- To enjoy full political awareness.
- To enjoy ongoing, general and integral training and education.
- To be the promoters or bearers of a political project.
- To influence public policy creation, focusing on ethno-cultural, gender and generational perspectives from the sphere of civil society.
- To develop individual and collective self-esteem.

And, at the end of the day, to never stop dreaming. To have confidence in our possibilities and our potential. □

Quito, 8 January 2004

Notes

- 1 Nina Pacari was elected National Deputy in June 1998 and then appointed Vice-President of the First Authority of the State in August of the same year, for a period of two years, as established by Ecuador's Political Constitution.
- 2 The "Dolores Cacuango" School of Leadership Training, attached to the Confederation of the Kichua Nationality - ECUARUNARI, was set up by women leaders.
- 3 Nina Pacari participated in second place on the national list of the Socialist-Pachakutik (17-18) alliance, an alliance that gained two seats. Nina Pacari was elected Vice-President of the National Congress for the period August 1988 to August 2000. *Izquierda Democrática* gained two seats, and so the indigenous candidate, Teresa Simbaña, being in twelfth place, never reached parliament.

QUEBEC NATIVE WOMEN: COUNTERING VIOLENCE

Michèle Rouleau

Violence is a phenomenon which affects all spheres of society at a number of levels. However, in the indigenous environment, it is omnipresent and many communities have to deal with endemic problems of violence. Family violence is so widespread in indigenous communities, that one does not hesitate to speak about it as a plague.

In Quebec's indigenous environment, a group of women has been working on these problems for more than 10 years. Quebec Native Women (QNW) is an organization which gathers women belonging to the 10 First Nations of Quebec. This association, which was established in 1974, works to defend women's rights, improve the living conditions of indigenous families and promote non-violence. Since it was founded, QNW has worked primarily for the defense of the rights of indigenous women who have suffered discrimination caused by the Indian Act, a federal law which has governed the life of First Nations in Canada since 1876. Under the terms of article 12,1,b of the the Indian Act, Indian women who married non-Indian men lost their Indian status. For an indigenous woman, losing her legal status as an Indian also meant being driven out of her community and being disavowed by other members of the community. This injustice added to the already existing discrimination against indigenous peoples meant Indian women found themselves facing double discrimination. The fight of Indian women against this discrimination has lasted for many years. And, although the Indian Act was amended in 1985, following the collective actions taken by groups of indigenous women, several problems persist. Today QNW continues its struggle for the defense of Indian women's rights.

Over time, QNW has widened its sphere of activity. At the end of the 1980s QNW started to look at the question of family violence. At this time in Quebec, the mobilization of the groups of women who worked in this field had led the provincial government of Quebec to recognize the problem and to initiate policies concerning marital violence. Indigenous women also began to speak out about

this violence which was part of their daily lives. At the QNW general assemblies and other meetings, the question of family violence came up frequently. Women spoke about the problems they themselves or others close to them experienced. They were very worried about the fact that their children were exposed to this kind of situation.

Breaking the wall of silence

QNW started to organize workshops and meetings on the question of family violence. Violence in the communities had hardly ever been talked about before, and QNW wanted people to be able to speak about it more, so that the women would be able to break "the wall of silence". Thus the idea of a public awareness campaign was born.

In 1988, QNW undertook a campaign in three stages. Initially, a poster was produced, illustrated by an indigenous artist-painter which read "Violence is tearing us apart: let's get together". These posters were distributed in all the indigenous communities in Quebec, and had a great impact; people talked about it. Then there were messages broadcast on community radio stations. There were three different messages: a child, a politician, and an elder talking to their communities and telling them that there was too much violence in the families and that this must stop. Thirdly, an information brochure was handed out in the communities.

It seemed that this public awareness campaign came at the right moment. People felt the need to speak out; it is clear that it opened the door to debate and allowed people in certain communities, to initiate reflection, organize awareness activities which reflected their values, their culture and to do this at a pace which was appropriate for them. Because, although the majority of the indigenous communities are confronted with serious social problems, their realities vary. The reality of the isolated communities differs largely from that of the more urban communities.

The extent of violence

In the 1980s, it was not only in Quebec that indigenous women were concerned with family violence. Other associations of indigenous women in Canada also took the same steps. In 1989, a survey carried out by the Ontario Native Women's Association showed that 84% of those interviewed said that family violence existed in their community, and 80% said they had been victims of this violence personally, whereas the statistics for Canada as a whole showed a 10% incidence of violence in non-indigenous families.

In Quebec, there had not been a specific investigation into family violence in the indigenous environment, but QNW had every reason to believe that the situation was similar to that of Ontario. And, the more people spoke about this question, the more they became aware of the extent and gravity of the problem. It was all the more worrying to notice the level of people's tolerance towards violence; many families lived in a perpetual climate of violence and did not have any hope of escaping it.

The background

In order to understand the origins of the social problems which confront indigenous communities, it is necessary to know the history of indigenous peoples. In Canada, the process of 150 years of colonization has had devastating effects. At the end of the 19th century, the government of Canada adopted the Indian Act, which was originally called "The Act for the Colonization of Savages". The Indian Act confirmed the lower legal status of the indigenous peoples and placed the "Indians" - according to the vocabulary used in the law - under the guardianship of the state. Thus, indigenous peoples were isolated from the decision-making processes concerning them and found themselves marginalized in a society with unfamiliar economic, social and political structures. It was under this system of guardianship that the Indian reserves were created. The reserves were lands set aside for exclusive use of status Indians with the aim of settling and indoctrinating the Indians. Acculturation, decline, loss of responsibility and dependence ensued.

Another tool of colonization, the so-called residential schools, were also a source of great harm to the indigenous peoples. In order to educate the Indians and thereby integrate them into Canadian society, the government of Canada, with the assistance of religious institutions, founded a system of residential schools. For the very large majority of the indigenous people who lived it, the experience of the residential schools was very traumatic: they were subjected to ill treatment, violence and sexual abuse. Today, they have to deal with the repercussions of this institutional violence on their personal and cultural integrity.

It is against this background that indigenous communities are trying to develop. The system of the Indian Act and the reserves harm the social, cultural and economic development of the First Nations; worse still, they encourage divisions and withdrawal. The list of social problems, including violence, just keeps getting longer.

A holistic approach

Family violence in indigenous communities takes various forms: physical and sexual aggression, psychological aggression, negligence and financial exploitation. It varies in frequency and intensity. This violence, and in particular violence towards women, according to some experts, is characteristic of colonized peoples who turn to violence against their own people.

Although some of the more "urbanized" communities, manage rather well, the majority of the indigenous communities suffer from a generalized "malaise". And this "malaise" translates into a multitude of social problems for which an all-inclusive solution is needed. Thus, in order to find solutions to the problems, QNW has always maintained that only a holistic approach, based on the potential of health of the individual and which integrates technical, professional, human, environmental and spiritual resources can manage to restore this balance, necessary to the individual, the family and the community. Maintaining that the problem of family violence is not only a problem of women but concerns the whole community, QNW formed a committee of community workers in 1991 in order to share experiences and to work out common strategies. Thereafter, the men were invited to take part in an ad hoc committee to discuss the question of family violence.

Acting with coherence

QNW has often criticized initiatives of the Canadian government which were applied in a uniform way to the whole country. According to QNW, the solution must come from community members, and the role of the government is to support them and not to impose inconsistent policies on them. The Association was very critical of the way in which the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada established shelters for abused women in four communities without consulting the organizations involved in the family violence files. QNW also intervened with the Canadian government in 1992 when it set up the *Blue Ribbon Panel on Violence against Women* without having consulted the indigenous women's organizations. Following the representation of indigenous women, the minister responsible for this initiative set up an "indigenous circle" (made up of indigenous women) which then joined the committee. The presence of the indigenous circle, made it possible

for the committee to “enter” communities everywhere in Canada and motivated many indigenous women to speak openly about the problems of violence which they experienced. It was the point of no return, from then on violence could no longer be concealed. A major milestone was reached: the communities had made a true awakening vis-a-vis the problem of family violence.

Violence vs. self-government

In the mid 1990s, the question of violence began to colour the debate on self-government of the First Nations in Canada. Women, as well as men, spoke publicly about their concerns about the possibility of the government of Canada signing agreements relating to self-government of First Nations. Several said that it was premature to speak about autonomy and autonomous indigenous governments as long as the indigenous leaders did not care about the serious social problems which affected the communities. Moreover, while working on the question of the rights of the individual, of the rights of the equality of women and non-violence, QNW also raised the questions of ethics, transparency and democracy in the communities.

Helping those who help

While continuing its awareness campaign, QNW considered the question of the support to community workers. It was noted that some of these workers have very little training, and often find themselves left alone when serious situations arise. Sometimes they have drug or violence problems themselves. There is also a very high rate of “burn out” among community workers. In several documents, QNW insisted on the need to support these social, community and health workers. Also, in the report submitted to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1993, on the question of improving services, QNW recommended that dialogue among all the workers be made mandatory and a multidisciplinary approach be taken for indigenous workers and intercultural training for non-indigenous workers.

QNW has always deplored the lack of support to victims and their families. Accordingly, QNW gave its support to shelters for indigenous women who were victims of violence so that they could regroup and prepare to defend their interests.

The question of justice, the intervention of indigenous police officers in cases of marital violence and especially the training of police officers, is also a great concern of QNW. Since 1997, with the creation of a post of justice coordinator, QNW was able to work on this issue in a more sustained manner.

In order to encourage reflection and the sharing of experiences, QNW organized a series of three conferences on violence on a provincial scale, which attracted more than 500 participants on each occasion: In 1995, at “*This is dawn 1*”: the participants were invited to endorse a solemn declaration of engagement in non-violence. In 1998, QNW hosted “*This is dawn 2*” - “*Pimadiziwin*” (an Algonquin word which means living in balance). The topics of the conference were the residential schools, post-colonial psychology, justice and healing. In 2001, the conference was called “*This is dawn 3*” - “*Skennen’ko:wa*” (an Iroquois word, resembling the word peace) and dealt with the topics of peace, non-violence, justice and social balance as well as de-victimization.

For future generations

Through the years, Quebec Native Women has developed an expertise and a particular approach to the question of family violence in the indigenous milieu. Through its work and its activities, the organization has made a significant contribution to the development of First Nations. With their courage and their perseverance in the pursuit of greater well-being for their communities, these indigenous women are bearers of hope for future generations. □

Michele Rouleau is Métis of Ojibway origin. She is a consultant in indigenous affairs and was president of Quebec Native Women from 1987 to 1992.

THE DISPARATE TREATMENT OF NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES

The United States of America is the wealthiest and most powerful state in the world. Unlike its poorer neighbours in the South, the United States enjoys the world's highest standard of living.

Another distinguishing factor that sets the U.S. apart from other states is the fact that, since its inception, the U.S. has had what many consider to be an enlightened policy with regard to Native Americans as indigenous peoples.

Despite this, Native American women, who may be Alaska Natives, Hawaiians or American Indians, have repeatedly alleged in national and international fora that they are, and have historically been, subject to racism and gender bias in the area of health care services and preventive health treatment in the U.S. In addition, they assert that many of their health problems and those of their communities are directly related to environmental racism, poverty and their inability to obtain judicial redress from tribal and state legal systems.

In the United States, provision of free medical treatment for Indian tribes was initially established by Treaties between tribes and the U.S. Congress. However, it was not until the passage of the Snyder Act in 1921 that Congress actually approved the use of federal funds for health services for American Indian tribes.

Federal funds are being allocated to the Indian Health Service, which is the principle health care provider for "federally recognised" Native Americans.

Nevertheless, health statistics leave no doubt as to the truth of the fact that in the United States there exists a pervasive pattern of racist abuse that is perpetrated by government health policies and programmes.

However, data and publications also leave no doubt as to the resistance and capacity of indigenous women to oppose racism in health practices. □

Sterilisation

By 1984, 42% of Native American women in the U.S. had been sterilised, as compared to 15% of white women.

In Lane County Montana, 14% of Indian women of child-bearing age were sterilised. The area is rich in coal and other resources and has a long history of Native resistance to mineral extraction industries.

Depo-Provera

Depo-Provera is a contraceptive that is administered by injection. The use of it has serious side effects, including increased risk of breast cancer, bone mineral loss, depression, etc, and the National Women's Health Network is opposed to its use for contraceptive purposes.

In 1986, it was revealed that the Indian Health Service had administered Depo-Provera to Native Women for 10 years without their informed consent. Many of the women patients were profoundly retarded.

Rape and incest

43.1% of Native American children under the age of 5 live below the poverty level.

87% of Indian females in 12th grade are reported as having had sexual intercourse. 92% of these women indicated they had been forced against their will to have intercourse. The incidence of rape among Native women is 3.5 times higher than that of other women.

46% of Native American mothers are under the age of 20 when they give birth to their first child, compared with 22% of white mothers.

The information on this page is drawn from an article by Mililani B. Trask "Indigeness, Gender and the Disparate Treatment of Native American Women in the United States".

INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND ACTIVISM IN ASIA: WOMEN TAKING THE CHALLENGE IN THEIR STRIDE

Jannie Lasimbang





Khasi woman in Maghalaya, India. Photo: Christian Erni



Tangkhul Naga woman in swidden field, India. Photo: Christian Erni

Indigenous women in Asia have come a long way – playing an active part in almost all spheres of the struggle for self-determination. Consistent involvement and commitment of women activists as well as ordinary women have helped to highlight the situation of indigenous peoples as a whole. Among the key areas where significant changes in the situation of women have taken place seen over the last three decades are decision-making, food security and development, international policy advocacy work, trafficking of women, conflict situations and societal change. Significant changes are not confined to positive trends and will be examined here from both a positive and negative standpoint.

Women and decision-making

One of the roles that indigenous women see as crucial for themselves today is in the decision-making process. Women have broken away from their traditional roles as house-managers and child rearers, allowing shared responsibilities in the home and more freedom for other involvements. This has given women more exposure and skills to assume leadership roles and positions, even though many have to be encouraged to take up such a role. However over the years, the dynamics of women's participation in decision-making have changed due to increased gender-based discrimination. Today, women are still left out, but it is for different reasons. One reason is the lower status of women in societies that are based on male-dominated/modern-day criteria such as efficiency, the masculine perspective, aggressiveness and a high level of education. A woman's ability to encompass roles as mother and worker, rather than the traditional values such as wisdom and good leadership, are common criteria for women leaders.

Having a role in decision-making - at the community, national and international levels - has both direct and indirect impacts on the status of women in society as well as on the contribution an indigenous society can make on all issues including human rights violations, food security and development. Having women participate in decision-making can also help change society's perception

of gender relations. As an example, the socio-cultural bias of indigenous societies that still limits the freedom of women and equity in ownership of property and opportunities may be much more easily changed if women are involved directly in decision-making.

In Asia, indigenous women have always played important roles in decision-making in the community although different communities have given different recognition to these roles. Some examples of women's decision-making roles in traditional societies in Asia include the Bali Aga or the Dusun communities in Sabah. In Sabah, the *Bobohizans* (women priestesses), women healers, and ritual specialists are highly regarded and are part of the council of elders in their community. Women are also the main decision-makers on many aspects related to agricultural production for home consumption, education and health of the children. However, as mentioned earlier, these have changed somewhat with time.

Tomunsi Matanul, 85, is a one of the last few Kadazan bobohizan from Sabah, Malaysia. She has been practicing as a bobohizan for 70 years. She says, "*One must practice the adat (indigenous systems) of the elders. In the old days, there was no other work except to work for one's livelihood. We relied on bobohizan for healing as there were no hospitals. When someone fell ill, we used the traditional way of healing and the person recovered... To learn it, we had to use our minds - we did not write.*"

Makitaak - 17, PACOS TRUST Publication

Women, food security and development

Women play a crucial role in achieving food security at all levels – the household, community, national and international level – but their efforts often remain invisible because women's perspectives are overlooked or not taken into consideration. This is also the case in policy discussions and program planning for community development. Women contribute significantly to food security by



Tagkhul naga woman and boy threshing. Photo: Christian Erni

Hmong woman selling flowers, Thailand.
Photo: Christian Erni



producing adequate food and ensuring access to good quality food. According to 1995 figures from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), more than 50% of the food grown in the world is grown by women. Figures also show that women compose 60% of the labour force in Thailand, 54% in Indonesia, 47% in the Philippines and 35% in Malaysia. In Nepal, fodder collection for buffalo is exclusively a woman's job, while in Pakistan, women carry out 60 to 80% of the cleaning, feeding and milking of cattle.

Indigenous women in agricultural communities in Asia perform most of the processing and storage of agricultural products, and in many places they market the produce, as well as prepare food and cook for their families. They also have special knowledge and expertise about the preservation of biodiversity and plant genetic resources, which is essential to food security. Yet these knowledge-holders and nurturers of biodiversity continue to be sidelined. There is also a failure to recognize the effects on women when examining economic and trade policies, globalization of food and agricultural industries, structural adjustment policies and the degradation of natural resources.

Women activists have worked hard over the last 10 years in negotiation processes at the international level to gain the recognition of the role of women in biodiversity related areas. They have also highlighted the fact that women's perspectives have to be taken into consideration in development-related fora at the local, national and international level, if development policies and projects are to succeed

It is hard to believe that the vocal indigenous women's leader, **C.K. Janu**, did not have any formal schooling. She has fearlessly challenged authorities on development issues affecting her *adivasi* or indigenous community in rural India, particularly as an advocate for women. She has worked relentlessly over the last 10 years to organize her community to demand recognition of their traditional land and their role in conserving the environment and to ensure that development projects do not displace indigenous communities.

Women and international policy work

In the past three decades, increasing numbers of indigenous women from Asia have become active in various international fora, particularly meetings at the United Nations and at conferences organized by UN agencies, international NGOs and governments that look into human rights, women's rights, and environment- and development-related processes. Conscious efforts to provide financial support to women through the UN Voluntary Fund, Human Rights Fund, and other governmental aid agencies - have ensured women are given exposure and equal opportunities in such fora. The policies adopted by these donors to increase women's participation and the sustaining role of many indigenous and non-indigenous women from donor agencies should be commended. Such support has enabled the formation of women's caucuses, the International Indigenous Women's Network (IIWN) and the Indigenous Women Biodiversity Network (IWBN).

Some of the Asian women who have consistently played an active role in the international sphere of activism include Joji Carino, Vicky Tauli-Corpuz, Herminia Degawan (all three from the Philippines), Stella

Tamang (Nepal), Chandra Roy (Bangladesh), and Yuki Hasegawa (Japan). Many others from Indonesia, Thailand, India, Burma, Tibet, Malaysia, Taiwan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have also expressed interest in participating in UN processes and other international meetings but language problems and the political situation in their countries act as barriers. Women in West Asia and China rarely participate, and if they do, the issues brought up are either highly politicized or do not focus on indigenous issues. Due to lack of information, some indigenous women activists who play a significant role at the local level have an inaccurate perception of international activism or downplay the need to participate in policy advocacy at the international level.

Many of the women who are able to be actively involved in international work come from communities where women traditionally play strong roles. They are also from English-speaking backgrounds. There is still a need, therefore, for more information, encouragement and financial support for interpreters for those who face language problems but would like to get involved in international advocacy work and to share their experiences with other women. It is also important to inform women of UN mechanisms that allow them to report on human rights violations without necessarily having to attend the international meetings. Women's participation must evolve from voicing the situation of indigenous peoples to participating in decision-making.

Yuki Hasegawa, an Ainu from Japan, is determined to bring the issues of indigenous peoples to the international level. Yuki says that despite language problems, she hopes one day she will be able to use international law fully to assert the rights of the Ainu people and other indigenous peoples. Speaking at a large indigenous women workshop at the World Conference Against Racism in Durban in 2001 was a nerve-racking experience for her, but her determination and support from other women gave her courage.

Women and human trafficking

Tireless efforts and commitment by activists have highlighted the plight of women, including indigenous women, trafficked across Asia. Women are trafficked to be bonded or grossly underpaid labourers, prostitutes and even "donors" for organ transplants. However, government authorities usually refuse to acknowledge the problem and some even brazenly use women prostitutes as an integral part of the tourist industry and as a means to earn foreign currency. Changing social attitudes, declining values and indifference, even among many indigenous societies, have allowed such victimization and criminal acts to rise to unprecedented levels.

Unfortunately, the ease of travel and communication across borders over the past two decades has led to the rise in the trafficking in women to alarming proportions. Indigenous societies are at a loss to find solutions for this new problems and the consequent spread of AIDS. It is tragic that despite efforts by women activists, these issues are becoming more complex involving syndicates of drug dealers and the authorities themselves. Women activists allege that no genuine efforts have been made by any government in Asia to resolve the inequities and victimization that women have suffered for so long. And many indig-



Tagkhol naga woman . Photo: Christian Erni

*Woman splitting bamboo. Sabah, Malaysia.
Photo: Christian Erni*



enous women involved in NGOs have tended to concentrate on welfare work to help women who become infected with HIV and have steered away from questioning the morality and ethics of societies that allow human trafficking.

Despite this, women continue to raise awareness in their own communities, to demand stronger and better legislation – including setting up judicial institutions that transcend national boundaries – and to organize public awareness campaigns on human trafficking. Much more attention is needed to address this issue and to look into new forms of trafficking such as supposedly voluntary recruitment of indigenous youths from the rural areas by seemingly legitimate agencies.

Kittiya Shimnee, a Lisu from Thailand, was orphaned at a young age. Her parents died from malaria after the government moved them to a resettlement area. Kittiya knows how vulnerable young indigenous women are when they move to the cities in search of work or education, so she has taken a number of youth who cannot afford to pay for their education into her home. She and a group of women are using their own resources to help the youth make some income from sewing and traditional embroidery and to get an education for other employment. She says there are more and more women who are forced to move from the hills when their lands are converted into protected areas or forcibly acquired for development projects.

Women and conflict situations

The political situations in Asian countries today are extremely diverse – making it hard to generalize about trends and conditions in the region. A growing number of countries face political conflicts with escalating violence and militarization in indigenous territories. In the past three decades increasing numbers of indigenous nations – such as communities in Burma, North East India, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, West Papua, Aceh, Mindanao, Tibet and Kashmir – have been subjected to armed conflict and genocide. Women are often made a target to subdue or break communities, and the tactics commonly used are rape and sexual harassment of women. In indigenous communities that have retaliated with armed confrontations, women have become even more vulnerable when the men leave their communities. Many reports show that women activists are particularly at risk of being targeted by the military. There is also increasing recruitment of women by both the army and armed movements but it is not clear what happens to women prisoners.

In areas affected by armed conflict and militarization, women are left to fend for the family as the men are either taken as forced labour, have fled from recruitments and arrests or have left to join armed movements. Some women

face constant hardship and worry for the family they have to look after and for family members who have left. Another appalling consequence that indigenous women face in conflict situations is forced religious conversion. Furthermore, in areas that are subjected to years of military operations, army personnel interact freely with communities and, as a consequence, many women get married to these personnel. At the end of the operation or when their husbands are transferred to another area, many of the women and their children are left behind without any support. Some believe that marriages and religious conversion are part of an organized military strategy with the purpose to convert and disrupt indigenous societies, knowing that women have a strong impact on the moral education of children.

Women activists in these areas of conflict, realizing the impact of violence in their communities on their children's well-being and security, have spoken out against the violence and atrocities, endangering their own lives. Groups like the Naga Women's Union and Mothers' Association were formed as a response to violence by security forces in North East India. Many women have also taken up the role of mediator between security forces and their community. In some cases of inter-ethnic wars resulting from increasing land pressure in the Cordillera region of the Philippines, women who have married into the clan of a warring tribe are asked to initiate the mediation through the *bodong* or peace pact, a traditional conflict-resolution mechanism.

Women and societal change

In many indigenous societies in Asia, women are still considered to be of lower status than men. Many women cannot inherit property, especially land. The reasoning is that daughters are expected to be married off and taken care of by their husbands. This puts divorced or widowed women, at a disadvantage later in life. Although there are many exceptions, this is still the prevailing practice in many indigenous communities. It should be pointed out, however, that women have always respected the concept of collective or communal properties and land, and this refers only to inheritable family properties.

Jarjum Ete is the President of the Arunachal Women's Welfare Society (APWWS), and nobody would believe that she is already a grandmother. A strong advocate for women's rights, she feels that the state does not address the issue of women's status adequately. "The Arunachal Pradesh Land Settlement and Records Bill 2000 defines a person with disability as either a widow, ... an unmarried woman, a divorcee or [a woman] whose husband is a member of the Armed Forces ..." These categories need "supervision" from a man. APWWS has protested, demanding the right to ownership of land and other properties for women.

Women who choose not to marry and women who cannot, or choose not to, have children are also looked down upon and may not attain high status in society despite their personal abilities. Single mothers (unwed mothers and women deserted by their husbands) are not given the support they need, and society often harbours negative attitudes about them despite the suffering some have gone through. In the past, women who got pregnant out of wedlock, including in rape cases, were forced to marry. Although, there is much more understanding and acceptance today because of the increasing number of single mothers, more can be done. A high number of incidences of domestic violence still occur in indigenous communities but often communities see it as a domestic problem rather than as a crime against women. Traditional courts or local conflict-resolving mechanisms still tend to reunite couples in non-reconcilable marriages. It is heartening though to see that more and more communities are beginning to understand family disputes and provide support for women facing difficulties.

The ease of communication and travel has enabled women to learn from each other. Despite the fact that many women are now taking up decision-making roles at the community level, it still appears to be difficult to make changes that will ensure parity between men and women in society. Some are questioning the norms in society, asking for domestic law reforms to instill positive values in society that would improve the lives of women.

The issues and needs again...

There is a need to look at how the role of women has changed and to ensure that their communities see their roles as important enough to merit equal participation in decision-making. Attaining this within indigenous societies involves dialogue, consensus building, acceptance, recognition and finally discarding prejudices against women. Thus, gender relations based on respect, equity and harmony have to be developed or must continue to evolve.

Community reflection is also needed to avoid dividing women and men into separate sectors. Women's groups formed to address issues faced by women tend to strengthen the capacity of women to handle their traditional roles in agriculture, education and health of the family rather than to lessen the burden of women by encouraging gender equality. Discussion of gender issues should be built into all conferences and meetings by developing gender perspectives rather than just holding separate meetings for women to discuss issues affecting them.

There is also a need to take the issues beyond communities and development programs. Like other processes in the struggle for self-determination, gender issues need to be viewed in the context of laws and policies, from the local to the international level. Once again,

strong participation by women in such fora is crucial. Women must work in cooperation with men as they currently dominate top positions in all United Nations organizations and both governmental and non-governmental agencies as well as representing the main decision-makers and policy-makers of the major financial and trade institutions, development agencies and multinational corporations, including the World Bank and the IMF.

Challenges: harnessing traditional wisdom

It is important for indigenous communities to develop strategies to promote openness in society, to harness and revitalize women's traditional roles and wisdom and to recognize the need for and ensure women's participation at all levels. In a society that ensures this, other social and economic issues such as social and cultural norms that are unfair to women will be relatively easier to overcome. Other issues that need reflection are indigenous political rights and the collective nature of much indigenous knowledge and wisdom.

The fact that women are not in decision-making roles could have an impact on how indigenous societies respond to important issues at all levels. These include the targeting of women as part of a strategy to disrupt a community for example, subjecting women to forced sterilization, rape and sexual harassment, as well as targeting women for religious conversion in a conscious effort to exploit women's roles in a family's spiritual development. Women's participation in decision-making can be viewed as part of the process of implementing the right of self-determination. When there is recognition and active participation of women in decision-making, other gender conflicts and issues in a society have a better chance of being reviewed and resolved. Looking at traditional institutions and systems that have promoted women's participation could provide important insights, particularly at the community level. □

***Jannie Lasimbang**, a Kadazan from Sabah, Malaysia, comes from a family of 12, nine of whom are females who are all active in working with indigenous communities both in Sabah and internationally. She attributes all their sisters' dynamic involvement to their mother who has provided them with a strong background and purpose. Jannie has been working as a researcher, community organizer and later as a trainer in PACOS TRUST from 1985 – 2000. She was elected as the Secretary General of the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) Foundation in July 2000 and is currently based in the AIPP Secretariat in Chiang Mai, Thailand.*

INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND THE ARMED CONFLICTS IN NEPAL



Photos: Jan Kjær, Mellempfolkeligt Samvirke

Stella Tamang



Introduction

Nepal is a small landlocked country sandwiched between the People's Republic of China in the north and the Republic of India in the south, east and west. Recent development indicators show that Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world. Nepal is a multilingual, multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic country.

The popular people's movement of 1990 overthrew the autocratic Panchayat System under the absolute monarchy and restored multi-party democracy and a parliamentary form of government. A new constitution was framed by an agreement between the King, the Nepali Congress and the United Left Front. This is the 13th year since the change, but rather than marching towards progress and peace, the country is heading towards armed conflicts and political instability. The armed conflict between the government and the rebel Communist Party of Nepal - Maoist (CPN-M) has now lasted for eight years. Conflicts are mostly concentrated in those areas where indigenous peoples are the majority. Indigenous peoples are therefore greatly affected by the conflicts. There are cases of indigenous persons being killed when they came out of their house to take a sick woman to a traditional healer for an emergency during a curfew at night. Arrests, detention, killings, rapes and disappearances are common. In most cases, this conflict has negative impacts on the human rights situation and economic condition, particularly for indigenous women and girls, as they are the targets of specific forms of violence and abuse.

Indigenous women are suffering and are main victims of armed conflicts, at the same time conflicts are also seen

as opportunities to liberate women from historical discrimination, exclusion and exploitation imposed upon them. Comparatively, their involvements are larger in Maoists' People's Liberation Army (PLA). Many questions have been raised as to why indigenous women are holding arms and are fighting. Can indigenous women contribute to the peace process? This article highlights the Indigenous women's position in indigenous movements, Nepali women movements and Maoist movements. It also analyses the role of indigenous women in peace negotiation with the conflicting parties at the grass root level and recommends expanding the role of women in future peace processes.

Current conflicts

There has been armed conflict between the government and the rebel Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) for eight years. A second set of peace talks and a ceasefire between the Government and the CPN-M broke down in August 2003. The fighting came to a stalemate with neither side making any headway. Most of the rural areas of the country are now under the control of the Maoist insurgents. Government presence is still limited to the district headquarters and a few armed garrisons. And although the security forces - under the Unified Command of the Army (UCA) - have been making forays into areas outside the secure zones, they have not been able to hold any territory permanently. For its part, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of the Maoists has not been able to prevent incursions by government troops into areas supposedly under their control.

This seesaw battle has come at a large human cost. Of the almost 9,000 people killed in violence related to the

CPN-M led “People’s War” begun in 1996, the outbreak of fresh fighting since August 2003 accounts for almost a quarter. Nearly 1500 people, ostensibly Maoists, have been killed by the security forces – more than 300 soldiers and policemen have lost their lives and about 300 civilian victims have also died. According to the human rights group, INSEC, the rate of killings during this last stage has been a mind-boggling 12.2 per day, an escalation unparalleled in the eight years of fighting (Thapa, 2004). It is estimated that 300 children have been killed since 1996 when the People’s War began.

King Gyanendra dismissed the elected government in June 2002 and appointed his own cabinet. After the dismissal of the Parliament, he changed the cabinet twice. The Parliament was dissolved one year ago. There is now no single elected body in the country. Royal ordinance has become the main source of law in the country. The Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal (1991) is no longer effective. All the political parties who were in Parliament and supportive of the constitution have launched a series of protests against the King’s regressive move and his cabinets. The opposition parties have been threatening to launch a movement against the monarchy itself, if the King does not revert to being a constitutional monarch. Anti-government rallies are routine, and the streets of Kathmandu are full of anti-monarchy slogans. Student wings of all political parties are on the streets demanding the republican state be restored. But, instead of being conciliatory, the King has begun to act outside the boundaries laid out by constitution.

In June 2003, the King appointed a government headed by Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa. It has been attacked by three fronts in less than a year- the Maoists; his own party, which wants him to quit; and the alliance of five pro-parliamentary parties that want an end to the present appointed government of King Gyanendra. At present, there seem to be four parties involved in the conflict with their differing demands and slogans: the King, the pro-parliamentary parties, the rebel Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the students and youths. Civil society, particularly indigenous peoples, Dalits and women are also asserting their rights in a peaceful movement.

Indigenous women in conflict areas

Constitutionally, Nepal is a Hindu State. Hinduism has built-in characteristics that are discriminatory towards women, indigenous peoples, minorities and Dalits. Nepal is also a male-dominated and patriarchal society. Women, as the Hindu ethical code says, have to follow their fathers when unmarried, their husbands when married, and their sons when widowed. They therefore fall into the trap of a traditional division of labour in which the women’s role is supportive and men do the intellectual and leadership or decision-making jobs. This

has been the dominant ideology in male-female relationships in practice and laws for the last 235 years. Indigenous women are no exception to this. Being inhabitants of a Hindu country, indigenous women also share these state values. Nepal is a feudal country with a Hindu feudal character. There is a saying, “To get a girl is like watering a neighbour’s tree. You have the trouble and expense of nurturing the plant but the fruits are taken by somebody else”. Under Hindu feudalism a daughter is useful and valuable in her childhood years when she can do chores and serve the household. But according to such feudal thinking, it is not worth investing in a girl because she will just end up marrying and going off to live in, and serve, another household.

But indigenous women have slightly different positions in their families and within their communities because of their matriarchal heritage. Women make most of the important decisions in the family. Some indigenous women are spiritual leaders and healers. Women shamans are equally competent and are respected in their communities. Indigenous women form the backbone of the agrarian economy. Indigenous women are the source of food, clothing and shelter. In traditional society, indigenous women play a mediating role between the husband’s family (home) and the brother’s family (*Maiti*) and within their own families if there is any problem. In spite of having all these abilities and skills, the situation of indigenous women has not been improving. They are exploited and discriminated against historically, politically and socially, which is clearly visible in the poverty, illiteracy, ignorance and disease found in indigenous communities. They do not lack skills and knowledge but they lack rights. It is not surprising then that this is one of the reasons the Maoist movement was triggered in such villages.

The armed conflicts are centred in the villages and districts inhabited by indigenous peoples and these villages are more and more inhabited only by women, elders and children, since the men, particularly youths, are leaving the villages both to escape from the conflict and to work as migrant labourers to feed their families. Women and children are the worst victims of the present situation of Nepal. The Nepali indigenous women are now not only caretakers and protectors of the families, but they are also negotiators with the government security forces (UCA) and the Maoists’ People’s Liberation Army (PLA) for the protection and survival of their families. Most families in the villages are now headed by women. However, they are not only victims and passive observers but also important actors.

Gender discrimination and indigenous women

According to the Hindu hierarchy and caste system (*Varna* system), indigenous peoples are placed below the Brah-

min, Chetry and Baisyas and above the untouchables, i.e., in the second last category of caste hierarchy. Indigenous women have had to deal with structural discrimination for centuries. In Nepalese society, the position of indigenous peoples and particularly women is lower, although there is no caste system and hierarchy within indigenous community. Culturally, indigenous women have high status and freedom in their own communities, particularly compared to Hindu women, but their social status is below the high caste women in the national system. According to Gautam (2001),

Gender discrimination in Nepal has actually increased, despite the kingdom's accession to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and international instruments. According to the 'Nepal Human Development Report 1998', indigenous women suffer 23 discriminatory laws in Nepal. Nepal tops South Asia's gender inequality ratio at 1:6, a notch above India at 1:5. [...] Work burden for indigenous women is double than that of other females because of the lack of education. This is why all the work they do is physical. Only 3% of indigenous women are literate. With all this discrimination, indigenous women are joining the Maoists to rebel against all the state laws that do not allow them to exercise their rights. A social structure of exploitive practices, wife beating and mass trafficking of girls in brothels of India and the Gulf are some few examples of gender discrimination. Every year 5,000-7,000 Nepali women are trafficked across the border. The majority of them belong to the minority ethnic people.

Indigenous women and women's movements

Women of the Hindu castes represent the majority society. Hindu women are the victims of discrimination but they share the state power indirectly with their men. They practice Hindu values and culture and they suffer from religious, cultural and social stratification. For example, they don't have equal rights to their fathers' property. The history of women's movements is as long as the history of democratic movements in Nepal. It addresses women's issues that relate to the problems of the majority Hindu women that relate solely to discrimination and class issues. They have been campaigning for equal civil and political rights and the inherent property rights of women. Though indigenous women have been actively taking part and have contributed to the women's movement, it has not addressed the issues of indigenous women, such as the secular state, recognition of group identity of indigenous peoples, equal rights for cultures and languages, education in mother tongues, the right to self-determination and autonomy, indigenous communities' access to and control of resources and indigenous knowledge. It is

therefore clear that the present Nepali women's movement does not represent indigenous women, as it has represented mainstream Hindu women. The mainstream women's movements expect liberation of women within the given structure of Hinduttwa (Hindu ideology); whereas indigenous women want to abolish Hindu chauvinism in all aspects of power structures that dominate other peoples, religions, cultures, languages, social values, intra-group relations and property relations. The mainstream women's movement is handicapped. It does not accommodate or include the demands and issues of indigenous women's movements.

Indigenous women in indigenous movements

48 indigenous peoples' organisations are united under Nepal Federation of Nationalities. To date all the organisations are headed by men and the issues of women are always at the bottom of the priority list. There are burning issues related to security, human rights violation, rapes, tortures, trafficking and women combatants but not a single attempt has been made by the indigenous peoples' organisations to raise these issues. The legalisation of companies that supply manpower and the increasing number of men leaving the country and going abroad is adding to the burden of the family placed on women but this issue has never been raised, discussed and or dealt with. The government is encouraging the youth to go abroad for different reasons: it cannot provide employment and wants to prevent unemployed forces from joining the Maoist rebels; and it encourages those Maoists who have surrendered their arms and left their party. It is estimated that 180-220 youths are emigrating daily, mostly to the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Israel, Arab Emirates, Qatar, Afganistan, Iraq, South Korea, Hong Kong, Macao, Malaysia, etc. Ex-British army personnel are also emigrating to Hong Kong, Brunei and Macao. The government has recently made it illegal to send women to work as housemaids in other countries except Hong Kong and Macao. It is estimated, however, that there are still more than 25,000 women in Saudi Arabia alone. There is an open border between Nepal and India and it is estimated that more than 500 youths are migrating to India daily.

Due to the indigenous peoples' struggle for national identity, Nepal has recognised 59 communities as indigenous nationalities of Nepal by enacting laws in parliament. The Government has constituted the "Nepal Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities". The foundation has made provisions for indigenous men and women to be members in the management committee, but there is a discriminatory provision for indigenous women: while it is a four-year term for indigenous men, the term is only two years for indigenous women. Indigenous men can be eligible for re-election or nomination for the next term while indigenous women cannot be elected

a second time. Most of the members of the management committee of the foundation are men.

Recently, the Supreme Court has issued an order to amend this discriminatory law against indigenous women members on a writ petition, filed by indigenous women lawyers. The Nepal Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities, being the government body, is obliged to function in support of the ruling government. It is already difficult for the foundation to support the indigenous peoples' movement and their struggle to raise indigenous peoples' issues, therefore addressing indigenous women issues is neglected.

The political, economic, religious and social policies of the state have always done more harm than good and have never been in favour of indigenous peoples. The Nepali language is the only official language, and is not understood by more than 50% of Nepali people. Most indigenous peoples speak their own languages. The high caste Hindu population constitutes 30% of the total population of the country but holds 85 to 90% of the government bureaucratic, judiciary and military positions and makes up more than 75% of the members in the Parliament.

Indigenous women joined indigenous movements and supported their demands from the very beginning. But they were neither promoted in leadership nor were indigenous women's issues on their organisational agenda. In most cases, they were discouraged from organising and from being vocal at the conferences. Indigenous women of Nepal hence formed their own separate women's organisations and a federation, the "National Indigenous Women's Federation of Nepal" in 1997 under the leadership of Stella Tamang. Indigenous women have raised other issues including indigenous economy, trafficking of women, bonded women and domestic violence.

Indigenous women in the Maoist People's War

Insurgency is the highest in the remote villages of the districts of Nepal. From the five districts where it started in February 1996 (Rukum, Rolpa, Jajarkot of the Midwestern Development Region, Gorkha of Western Development Region and Sindhuli of Central Development Region), the Maoist war has run across the whole country. These hill districts, which are now the guerrilla zones, are predominantly inhabited by indigenous peoples. According to Hisila Yami, head of the Maoist Women Front and, in the Maoist strongholds every third guerrilla is a woman and among them 70% are from indigenous groups. According to a recent article by Com. Parvati,

[...] there are several women in the Central Committee of the Party. There are dozens of women at the regional level and hundreds in the district levels, and several thousands in the area and cell levels in the Party. In the People's Liberation Army there are many women com-

manders, vice commanders in different sections within the brigade, platoons, squads and militia. There are separate women's sections in the brigade: women platoons, women squad teams, women militia teams functioning in the field. In the United Revolutionary People's Council, which is an embryonic central people's government organizing committee, there are four women out of 37 members. Women's participation in all levels of People's Councils has been made mandatory".

However, Parvati has also raised the problem of "conservatism" in the party that leads to relegating women's cadres doing physical labour, thereby robbing them of the chance to develop in party policy matters and other fields.

The indigenous movements of Nepal have been focused primarily around six issues. They are:

1. A secular state, equal rights to language, culture, education, information and development.
2. Restructuring the political power, i.e., in Parliament: changing the Upper House into House of Nationalities and reserving seats for indigenous peoples in the Lower House.
3. The right to self-determination and national autonomy.
4. Affirmative action in education, bureaucracy and health.
5. Participation in decision-making processes, from planning to implementation.

The CPN-M has supported all these demands and has made the indigenous agenda part of their main political agenda. Recently, the Maoists began to create "autonomous peoples' governments" to correspond with ethnic or regional homelands. Among these are the "Magarant Autonomous People's Government" in the Maoist heartland of western Nepal, inhabited largely by Magar indigenous peoples, one of the largest ethnic group of Nepal and the "Madhesi Autonomous People's Government" for the Terai plains that stretch across the southern part of Nepal. The Maoists have declared six autonomous regions formed on the basis of ethnicity such as for Tamang, Gurung, Tharu, Kirat and Newar. They have formed three Autonomous Regional Peoples' Governments on the basis of regions. Altogether, they have formed nine autonomous regional people's governments in Nepal. The message from Maoists is clearly that they are fighting for the benefit of the poor, socially and economically backward people and to fulfil the aspirations of indigenous peoples, Dalits and women.

Some of the reasons why indigenous women join the People's War are:

1. Indigenous women are discriminated against in three ways, as women, indigenous and indigenous women. As women, they don't have equal rights to

inherit property. As indigenous persons, they don't have equal rights to their mother language, religion, culture and access to decision-making processes. Additionally, discrimination against women can be found within indigenous communities too.

2. They are the poorest of the poor, generally illiterate and have no political visibility.¹
3. Indigenous women are the victims of environmental degradation, and forest and biodiversity loss.
4. Due to steady eroding of indigenous traditions and values, the indigenous women's status and roles are declining.
5. Indigenous women suffer from growing violence within families, due to growing discrimination and increasing poverty.
6. The Maoist movement effectively campaigns against domestic violence and alcohol, and thereby addresses women's problems. Many indigenous women who have been physically assaulted and repressed during counter-insurgency attacks are found to join the Maoists wholeheartedly. There were numerous cases of the police apprehending women in the police posts. They supported the Maoist movement and were directly involved in the armed conflict. The women's active involvement in the logistical and fighting ranks of the Maoist movement is critical.

Peace building and indigenous women

Nepal is now in a grave crisis; conflicts are escalating. But armed conflicts no longer belong solely to men; women from different segments of society are also involved. At this moment, far away from the political game and power wrestling, they are fighting for their survival and for the protection of their children, the future generation of Nepal. The role of indigenous women in conflict areas is also very important, as they are not only involved in the armed struggle but also practicing negotiators between the conflicting parties in their day-to-day life. They are the unrecognised part of civil society.

Unfortunately, peace talks have failed twice and there is no sign of the possibility of a new peace dialogue at the moment. Civil society, including women played a creative role in bringing both parties to the table. Behind the failure of peace talks are those who are benefiting from the armed conflicts. The peace initiative is now becoming complicated and complex. There were two parties, the Government and the Maoists, in the first peace talks. Due to the dismissal of elected government and parliament, there were three parties during the second peace talks: the King, the Alliance of pro-parliamentarian parties and the Maoists. These three parties had not recognised each other as legitimate authorities for the negotiations. The environment was not made conducive for a result-oriented peace talk and as a consequence the second peace talk broke down. There was no guarantee for implemen-

tation even if peace talks had been successful. In both peace talks, civil society played the role of facilitator.

Nepali people can play the role of mediators but experience has shown that there is a need for an international presence. The participation of indigenous peoples, Dalits and women cannot be ignored in the negotiations and peace talks. Indigenous women, who have encountered the government security forces and the Maoist armed forces in their daily life, can play a greater role in contributing to the peace process. The time has come for the country to recognise the importance of the role played by indigenous women in conflict resolution and peace building and to support and strengthen their capacity. The courage indigenous women are showing to defend their children and families in these difficult situations and the wisdom and skills they are using in negotiating with the Government Unified Command of the Army and the Maoists People's Liberation Army must be recognised, appreciated and respected. The role, responsibility and efforts indigenous women are undertaking to contribute for the restoration of peace in the villages should not and cannot be ignored. □

Notes

- 1 42% of the total population of Nepal live under poverty line.

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Stella Tamang is an indigenous women's activist. She is the founding chair of the National Indigenous Women's Federation of Nepal and founder of Nepal Tamang Women Ghedung. She has been actively involved in international non-violent conflict resolution and peace building training for many years. She is also a member of the Indigenous Peoples' Peace Solidarity Committee, Nepal.

GENDER IN SÁPMI



SOCIO-CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS AND NEW CHALLENGES

Jorunn Eikjok

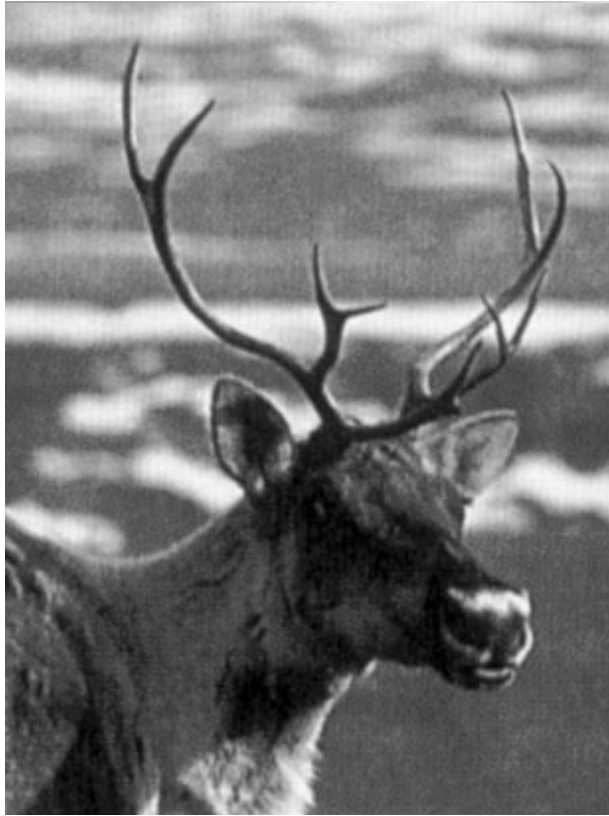
Two years ago, at a meeting of Arctic indigenous peoples at which gender was discussed, two different images of gender relations were presented. On the one hand, it was concluded that equality and complementarity between men and women form the basis of indigenous society. The men hunt while the women take care of the meat and hides. The other image that emerged indicated that, among indigenous peoples of the Arctic, young women tend to move away from the local communities to gain an education, whereas the men remain in their traditional livelihoods. The result is almost purely male societies with a reduced quality of life.

Although they are quite different - perhaps even opposites - these two views of gender reality exist side by side in the minds of Arctic indigenous peoples. In this article I intend to discuss how these gender realities relate to *Sápmi*, the Sami homeland.

Young woman from a reindeer herder family in Nellim, Finland. Photo: Ola Røe

Background

Geographically, Sápmi covers a large area of Finno-Scandinavia, from the sub-Arctic climate zone in the south-west, to the Arctic climate zone in the north-eastern corner of Europe. The Sami homeland is divided among four nation states: Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. The Sami people are termed indigenous. Like so many other places the world over, Sápmi was colonised and the Sami people subjected to oppression. It is estimated that the Sami number between 70,000 and 100,000 persons. We have our own history, language and culture, which are different from those of the surrounding populations. The great geographic variations of Sápmi are reflected in the cultural variations of its people, who speak three distinct Sami languages. Sami is included on UNESCO's list of threatened languages.



In recent decades, great socio-cultural changes have occurred in Sápmi. Lifestyles have changed from being anchored in nature to new and more modern ways. A few decades ago, large parts of the Sami population engaged in mostly subsistence economies, relying on fishing, reindeer breeding, Arctic agriculture, Sami handicrafts (*duoddji*) and whatever else nature might yield. Nowadays, these traditional livelihoods are subject to enormous pressure due to the global market economy. In Sápmi, people supporting themselves through these primary livelihoods are struggling to survive because of the harsh regulations that have been placed on them by the state in recent years. Many people have been affected by the stricter requirements for acquiring concessions allowing them to continue within our traditional livelihoods. These concessions are granted only on certain conditions and according to an established minimum for volume of production, reindeer herd numbers, fishing boat size, etc. In many cases, those who until recently had been running small-scale enterprises have had to quit due to lack of sufficient yield. Such measures hit indigenous people particularly hard and limit the use and yield of our natural resources. As a further result, indigenous knowledge of sustainable natural resource use is threatened. In addition, for people who have traditionally survived in extreme climate settings, these policies adversely influence their collective dignity.

Contemporary times are characterised by diversity and cultural change. Such processes occur in all parts of the world, in a variety of ways and with a variety of consequences. Cultural globalisation generates huge challenges for a better understanding of others, not least internally within indigenous peoples' societies. Modernity takes place when society moves from a lifestyle based on multiple possibilities for survival to one of specialisation - whilst traditions at the same time are challenged. Modern-day society has created new opportunities and made a range of new identities available to the Sami. In a number of local communities, especially along the coast, the Sami have experienced cultural denigration and stigmatisation. During the last 30 years, the Sami struggle and the majority society's acceptance of greater cultural diversity have revitalized Sami identity and made it possible for new Sami institutions to be created. The Sami people are part of the global indigenous movement, and we have grown stronger by participating in this international struggle.

Today, Sami society draws on both tradition and modernity. The extent to which Sami people draw on either depends significantly on their life situation (employment, education, etc.) and generation (older people tend to be more traditional). Sami traditions are influenced by the majority society as well as global influences, and new cultural expressions appear as a consequence. Nevertheless, we are still vulnerable as an indigenous people, as the boundaries of our existence are defined to

a large extent by the majority society. It is essentially a question of power.

Gender and transformation in Sápmi

In parts of Sápmi, women formerly held the main responsibility for agriculture, while the men were away large parts of the year herding reindeer, fishing or hunting. The typical Sami household extended far beyond the house or tent because families gathered their sustenance from nature through the seasons. In other Sami communities, the people were reindeer breeding nomads, who moved with their families throughout the year and lived in tents. With the advent of the longer school year for children in the 1950s and 60s, many families decided to settle. The mothers would remain in the villages and only move with their children between the winter and summer settlements. The daily work with the herd in the mountains has become mainly the arena of the men. In Sami society, men and women have, each in their own way, been bearers of culture, though women carried the greater share because they had responsibility for raising the next generation. As the Sami 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 economically responsible for the family, despite the fact that agriculture had once been the responsibility of the women of Sápmi. Sami 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 has brushed aside the position Sami women traditionally had, effectively weakening their position in relation to men.

Marylyn Waring, an economist from New Zealand, states that the second wave of colonisation of indigenous peoples occurred after the Second World War, when the work and production of indigenous women was placed outside the economy by establishing the concept of Gross National Product – GNP. Under these terms, the work of indigenous women was simply not appreciated. The prevalent norms were those of Western society, which meant that the man was perceived as the breadwinner and economic head of the family, and the woman was seen as having the role of housewife. A society where the relations between the sexes were different, and where women had autonomy in certain spheres of society, was defined as backwards and primitive. This perception is a tragedy for many indigenous peoples.

Gender and modern Saami society

Traditional society is characterised by the fact that the individual defines her/himself primarily as a member of a family, group or place, as part of a community. The ideal was to “be of use” to society. Sami girls were given responsibility at an early age and had limited freedom compared to boys. The socio-cultural changes in recent decades have meant that a person can no longer inherit her/his identity from parents or family, or live a life like them. Identity and self-perception must be shaped by each individual and derive from the possibilities each person sees in her/his life situation. In modern society, it is a question of “finding oneself”. People are faced with a wide spectrum of new choices, which, in itself, can be quite challenging. Everything from hairstyle to interior decorating and child-rearing may be involved. An increased range of Sami identities have developed, including new ways of being women and men, resulting in new Sami expressions of femininity and masculinity. At the same time, gender roles appear to have become especially rigid.

The ideal in Sápmi has been to “get along”, to survive in alliance with the community and with nature. The traditional ideals for women were to be *barggán* – good, conscientious workers; *gieđalaš* – good at handicrafts, dextrous; and *doaimmalaš* – able organisers. These female qualities were needed in the running of a subsistence household community. Older women who were raised with these ideals may feel that the young women of today are rather indolent. “*Women who don't know how to sew ought to be forced to live under a bush,*” an older woman once told me. For the men it is laudable to be *searalaš* – physically strong and sensitive to nature. The modernisation of society has decreased the need for these ideals but they still exist, especially in the older generation.

Traditionally the physical ideal for a Saami woman was to be full-bodied. This is no longer the case, and Saami women are subjected to the same pressures to be slim and control the female body as elsewhere in the Western world. Modern cultural expressions are, however, still perceived as a dissolution of norms and moral decline, and those who have accepted them were, for a time, relentlessly branded as too Norwegian and not Sami enough. When the Sami women's movement was established in the 1970s, it was announced on Sami radio that it was these Norwegianized women, who were to hold a meeting. The reason for this was based on a perception, created by the Sami indigenous movement, that women and men in Sami society were equals, in contrast to the relationship between genders in the majority society. According to this idea, the attitude was that women who struggled for equal gender rights had misunderstood the Sami woman's role, and were less Sami than they ought to be.



Reindeer herder in Tlems, Norway. Photo: Ola Røe

The issue dominating Sami public debate is the right to “land and water”. In this discourse, men are entirely dominant. The public discourse on managing nature reflects the interests, experience and understanding of men. The discourse on the Sami perception of nature is masculinised, with the result that representations of the Sami man as connected with nature, as a hunter, fisherman and herder of reindeer, are encouraged. In her book *The Male between Myth and Modernity*, the Sami researcher Kristine Nystad describes the lives of young men in a Saami village. Their concept of masculinity is connected to nature, and the snow scooter is their prime object of identity, even though they do not hunt or herd reindeer, nor have any intention of doing so.

In modernity, men are not subject to the same demands for change as women are, but still, the male role has changed considerably. In some situations men stagnate and become losers; the male role seems to have less flexibility than the female one. Because Saami masculinity is so strongly tied to nature, it appears that Sami men reject hegemonic male ideals created in the modern or urban majority society. Modernity creates a transformation of Sami cultural expressions that is handled differently by men and women.

Education and gender

Since the 1960s, in some of the countries inhabited by Sami, the so-called welfare state has made educational opportunities widely available. This has meant new prospects for Sami youth in comparison to those of their parents. In her book *Saami in the Modern World*, the Sami social-anthropologist Vigdis Stordahl points out that education creates new distinctions in Sami society, and a gulf exists between those who *have* received an education and those who *have not*. The condition for succeeding in modern society is to master the competences of *both* the Sami *and* the majority society, i.e. to possess multicultural competencies. Those with the greatest opportunities in modern Sápmi are persons who are functionally bilingual and master the Sami language as well as the language of the majority society. It is the women, young as well as mature, who primarily take advantage of the opportunity for education. At the Sami University College in Guovdageaidnu, 80% of the students are women. Many Sami communities lack educational facilities, and if they have them, those available often offer only a limited range of subjects, so many young people must leave the communities to get an education. In certain districts, twice as many girls as boys embark on a college or university-level education. Despite their higher education, they tend to

choose traditional women's jobs within the health and social sectors. On average, women in these districts are better educated than women in several districts inhabited by Norwegian women. New research shows that, in the majority society, schools cater to middle class girls and boys lose out in the competition with girls. This trend is reinforced within the minority communities. In a newly published study, "Young in Sápmi", the Sami psychiatrist Siv Kvernmo states that Sami youth, girls as well as boys, have more problems in school than Norwegian youth. In addition, this study and others show that more Sami boys than girls drop out of school. As many as 85.7% of boys from reindeer herders' homes imagine themselves working in the field of reindeer-breeding at age 40, despite the severe limitations for growth in this occupation. This reveals the high symbolic status of reindeer-breeding and tells us how strongly this livelihood is tied to the masculine identity of these boys. It also reveals the existing cultural barriers and points to the reason why young Sami men fall short when it comes to the demands of Norwegian majority society. For these and other reasons, their mobility is reduced.

What generally happens is that the young women leave and the young men remain in the village. As mentioned earlier, education is a decisive condition for success in modern Sápmi. Because the women are more likely to acquire an education, it follows that this in itself creates a new dividing line between the sexes.

Within the traditional Sami livelihoods of reindeer breeding, fishing and agriculture, the situation today is such that most people need a supplementary income. Most often it is the woman in the family who provides for this necessity by taking a job in the public sector. In other words, the women contribute to the men being able to remain in traditional occupations. This phenomenon may be characterised as a modern barter relationship between women and men based on traditional gender roles.

Gender in Sami politics

In Scandinavia, women's representation in elected public office is the highest in the world. Many hold the so-called "Nordic model" up as an example. But the situation in the Sami parliaments – *Sámediggi* – is rather different, in that the representation of women is exceptionally low. In Finland there are 21 members of the Sami parliament and seven of them are women, which means 33%. In Sweden, out of 23 members, eight are women and 15 men, i.e. there are almost twice as many men as women. In the Sami parliament of Norway, out of 39 members only seven are women, which means that the proportion of women is only 18%. In other words, Sami politics are to a large extent dominated by men. Sami women clearly lack influence, women have a weak voice. The presidents of the Sami parliaments have so far only been men. However, in Finland a woman vice-president has just been elected, and in Norway the vice-president has always been a woman. In

1993, a position to coordinate women's promotional initiatives was created within the Sami parliament in Norway, but this has not yet led to increased female representation.

In 2002, I collaborated with social scientist Torunn Petterson on a study sponsored by the Sami parliament in Norway. The title of the study was "*Election, Representation and Equal Rights*". The aim was to discover why so few women were represented in the Sami parliament. What we found was that if a woman was to stand a chance of getting elected to parliament, she would have to be placed at the top of her party's list to have the greatest chance of being elected. Only a quarter of the lists have had women as top candidates. In this connection we proposed a change to the electoral rules. Another obstacle to being elected is that women, in addition to having jobs in the public sector, are rather committed by other work and especially caring for their families, which reduces the time available for commitment to politics. We proposed that the organisations should establish a long-term recruitment strategy with the purpose of persuading more women to become involved in politics. The lack of gender parity in elected Sami legislative bodies represents a dilemma for democracy and legitimacy.

On the other hand two thirds of the staff of the Sami parliament in Norway are women, and half of the managers are women. There is also a female dominance in the administrations of the Sami parliaments of the other countries. It appears that the women tend to work in administration while the men are occupied with politics.

As you would expect, the Sami also participate in local democracy, such as municipal council politics. Last autumn, three women were nominated as spokespersons in three districts. This signals a new trend and is an indication of increased political activity among Sami women.

Reflections on gender in Sápmi

At the beginning of this article, conflicting images of gender relations were introduced. One asserts equality between women and men while the other depicts great socio-cultural inequalities between the sexes among Arctic indigenous societies. How can such disparate versions of reality coexist? In fact, the perceptions of gender realities are not so far from actual conditions. Because we construct a sharp divide between we indigenous and "the Western world", we appear as a natural people with harmony between the sexes, in contrast to the prevailing "gender confusion in the West". This version exists and is reinforced because of the dramatic changes our indigenous peoples have passed through in recent decades. Traditional perceptions of reality can represent a kind of security and give us the impression that the conditions of the past are still at hand. In addition, we lack knowledge of modern indigenous society, and this allows us to go on believing in the old myths of gender. New research on gender is sparse, especially research on men. The general explanation for the fact that

there has been less focus on men than on women with regard to gender is that men are perceived as the norm, representing the normal. Therefore, men can exclude themselves from the gender discourse in modern Sami society.

The lines of division that are developing between Sami women and men are disquieting. The establishment of Sami parliaments have given men a new possibility for articulating their masculinity. Electoral mechanisms and attitudes contribute to making these assemblies places of male domination. Could this be a sign of a time in which Sami masculinity is under threat in modernity, thus making men struggle all the harder to gain a position in indigenous politics? Sami rights and nature use are the spheres of men, but is it also a virtue and a duty of Sami masculinity to defend the land? The women of Sápmi are flexible and can adapt to a society based on specialised knowledge and new capacity building, all the while raising the next generation. They are mostly engaged in defending and developing the Saami language and culture.

In the 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s, Sami women were often used as symbols of the difference between the Sami and the Norwegians. It was alleged that, in contrast to women in the majority society, Sami women were strong and powerful. The Sami woman was used as an ethnic symbol; she was portrayed as the all-mother of Sami culture. This put pressure on us women because we experienced reality altogether differently. We felt ourselves to be doubly repressed, firstly by the patriarchal structures of our own community and secondly in relation to being indigenous and Sami. In a similar way, in all parts of the world, women's voices, values, experiences and knowledge have not been given expression in those fora and contexts that are decisive for the development of society. Historically, women have to a large degree found themselves excluded from fora where important decisions were taken. Attention to this phenomenon has only been paid in the wake of the women's movement's work, which is relatively recent. There is furthermore an unequal division of power between the Sami peoples and the majority societies. The gender relations in Sápmi represent one aspect of these asymmetric power relations.

I have been involved in both the Sami ethno-political movement and the Sami women's movement since the 1970s. We were unpopular among our Sami brothers for introducing the women's cause into the struggle for our people's rights. We were unpopular among our fellow sisters in the wider community for bringing in our ethnic and cultural identity as women. Our brothers ridiculed us because gender was irrelevant for them; our Nordic sisters rebuked and lectured us because the minority and indigenous question was irrelevant for them. It has been difficult to fight for our rights *both* in relation to indigenous and feminist issues. The men in the Sami movement have regarded the Sami women's movement as divisive in terms of the struggle for Sami rights. The Sami men and part of the Sami movement have not realized that the struggle for women's rights had to be a part of the indigenous struggle.

In addition, equal rights feminism turned men into adversaries with regard to women's interests. The gender perspective could have helped to comprehend the diversity and disparity in indigenous society, and could have helped show how power and competences are portioned out in this society. It is a great failing of our society that this perspective is being undermined. Only time will tell whether it will be accepted that the gender-analytical perception of the situation will strengthen Sami culture and society, rather than threaten it. In certain respects, Sami women may have more in common with women in other parts of the indigenous world than with Sami men, and vice versa. The intention is not to invert progress by exchanging the male view with the female view of things but to seek knowledge that highlights men's and women's dissimilar experiences, perspectives, practices and ways of understanding. This will also strengthen democracy within indigenous society.

Conclusion

In modern Sami society, manifold forms of being Sami exist, and new expressions of being female and male are being generated. In Sami society, femininity and masculinity are linked to disparate fields. Socio-cultural lines of division based on gender are increasingly emerging. Traditional Sami livelihoods are totally dominated by men, whereas the women find themselves in the "specialised knowledge" society. Men dominate in politics, and women are the caretakers of culture. Sami women's perspectives and ways of understanding are scarcely reflected in the public discourse, which is still strongly dominated by men. The looming question is whether, in the advance towards a diverse and democratic Sami society, women's realities, experiences and voices will be allowed expression in a wider public space. The challenge for the indigenous community will be to achieve a more even distribution of women and men in the different areas of society. This would also contribute towards an improvement in the balance of power and education between the sexes, which again would strengthen the vitality of Sami society in such a way that it would be easier for us to defend ourselves against external forces that threaten to undermine our basic rights and existence. □

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THE FLEXIBILITY OF GREENLANDIC WOMEN

Gitte Trøndheim



*Upernavik, Greenland.
Photo: Gitte Trøndheim*

Women in Greenland have always been adept at adjusting and adapting their lives to the demands of society. They have been flexible and ready to change, even though their traditional occupation as supportive spouses to their hunter husbands was made redundant by the shift from hunting to fishing in the first half of the 20th century. Greenland's women have had more opportunities to adjust than the men who, for the most part, have been able to remain in their traditional occupation as hunters. It has not been necessary for men to find new trades and occupations to the same extent as it has for women. An important alternative for women has been waged work and education, and despite changing social conditions for women in Greenland from the start of colonisation and throughout the years of modernisation, they have been able to achieve increased participation and independence in Greenlandic society.

I grew up during the Greenland Home Rule period, which began in 1979. When I was 11, my mother was a trained hairdresser and my grandmother was a hunter's wife, like all the other women in the family before her. Later on, when we moved away from the settlement, she worked in a shrimp factory. I was thus the first person in my family to have the chance to gain an academic education. I belong to a generation who can thank the women who went before them for having paved the way for the many opportunities that exist for us in Greenland today. During my childhood, both in school and at home, I and the other children were often told how very important it was to obtain an education. It did not matter whether you

were a boy or a girl, society needed everybody. For this reason, I have always felt that in many areas there are equal rights between the sexes. However, as far as starting a family, gaining an education and pursuing a career are concerned, I still see some unresolved issues for us Greenlandic women.

Women in history

The social organisation of the traditional Greenlandic community was dominated by the household and its established role pattern according to gender and age. The household might consist of a nuclear family or an extended family with two or three generations. The household was defined by two criteria: (a) kinship and (b) household-sharing with others. Within the household, it was the oldest man and the oldest woman who made the decisions. Their responsibilities were first and foremost to give advice on questions of hunting, and to keep track of the household's store of food. They were the outward representatives of the household, and they decided how the catch was to be used and which other household could have a share in the catch.

The division of labour within the Greenlandic hunter community was based on gender, and the boys were trained to become hunters by their father or another male family member. Similarly, early on, the girls acquired their mother's skills in running a household and in preparing hunting products, as well as sewing skins and hides.



After colonisation, the ensuing trade - and not least the introduction of Christianity - effectively transformed traditional Greenlandic society. The Danish colonisation of Greenland triggered some basic socio-economic changes that impacted on the organisation of families and gender roles during this period:

- a) Men's work became the most important as viewed by society, and there was a tendency to reward the *piniartorsuaq* (master hunter), which resulted in skewing the formerly complementary relationship between men and women in Greenland.
- b) In the 1830s, Greenlandic men began to receive training as catechists and artisans for employment in trade, the Church and the administration. This phenomenon was at the origin of the formation of an elite and the emergence of a middle class among Greenlanders. For the first time in the history of Greenland, men had the possibility of full-time employment in areas other than those that dealt with procuring food.
- c) Inspired by the ideologies and norms of the Danish middle class, the households became increasingly divided with regard to gender. During this stage, some of the women were trained as maids (*kiffat*) for Danish families. These women often became the wives of the educated Greenlandic elite.

This period was noticeably characterised by increased individualisation and differentiation, and a new Greenlandic middle class with Danish norms and rules as their basis played a part in the formation of a class structure and an altered view of gender status.

Industrialisation and modernisation

The advent of the industrialisation of the fishing trade brought about other radical changes in society, changes that impacted on the situation of the family and the sexes. This stage of industrialisation commenced in the 1950s, when fishing became the main occupation. Up to this point, fishing had been organised at household level. Modern fishing methods and factories for processing fish and shrimp, however, required larger boats, better equipment and training. As unskilled workers in the fishing industry, Greenlandic women became loosely attached to the new labour market. In some ways, the fact that it was the women rather than the men who, during the modernisation phase, became wage workers represents a break with tradition. At the same time, however, it was the women who continued to look after the home and the children.

Towards the end of the 1960s, Greenland had developed into a complex society with strong internal contrasts – between men and women, Greenlanders and Danes. During this time, Greenlandic women were exploited on the labour market where, as unskilled workers, they received the lowest

pay and had the most unpleasant work conditions. They were “doubly” oppressed: culturally by the Danes and politically by Danish as well as Greenlandic men.

The Home Rule period

The revision of the Danish Constitution in 1953 failed to bring about the desired effect of more participatory democracy and equality with the Danes.¹ This fact contributed to the Greenlandic population's demand for a change in the status of their relationship with Denmark, which resulted in the implementation of the Home Rule in 1979. This treaty was to have a crucial influence on the changing conditions in Greenland during the 1980s and 90s. Signe Arnfred demonstrates that the new generation of politicians were men who on the whole were recruited from the elite. The Greenlandic elite was made up of people with a relatively high level of education, such as teachers, clergymen, social workers etc, as well as highly placed civil servants within the public sector. They spoke Danish and were, in many cases, educated in Denmark. They had influenced Greenlandic society with regard to culture and identity up until the establishment of Home Rule, during which time the motto had been “Greenlandisation of both society and culture”. With the introduction of the Home Rule treaty and the establishment of the Home Rule government and the *Landsting* (parliament) – with its associated administrative apparatus - and not least the demand for Greenlandisation of the workforce, a number of new educational fields were established, and these again opened up new opportunities for Greenlandic women. Within a relatively short time span, Greenlandic women began to make their presence known in large numbers on the educational market.²

At about this time, the European feminist movement's critique of capitalist societies' patriarchal gender relations had brought about widespread changes in the attitude to gender. Influenced by this, young Greenlandic women of the social elite turned for inspiration to the formerly more egalitarian relations between the sexes in earlier Inuit societies. Identification with one's ancestors was now considered a positive trait. Soon the women were demanding equal rights at all levels of society. Moreover, the women's movements also had an influence in solving problems of unemployment, the housing shortage and alcohol abuse, as well as social problems due to modernization. The direction women took in the 1980s and 90s towards modern society and education resulted in both sexes – to various degrees and in various manners – becoming integrated into the new social order.

Equal rights between men and women

By the end of the 1940s, several women's associations had been established and, in the 1960s, they all grouped

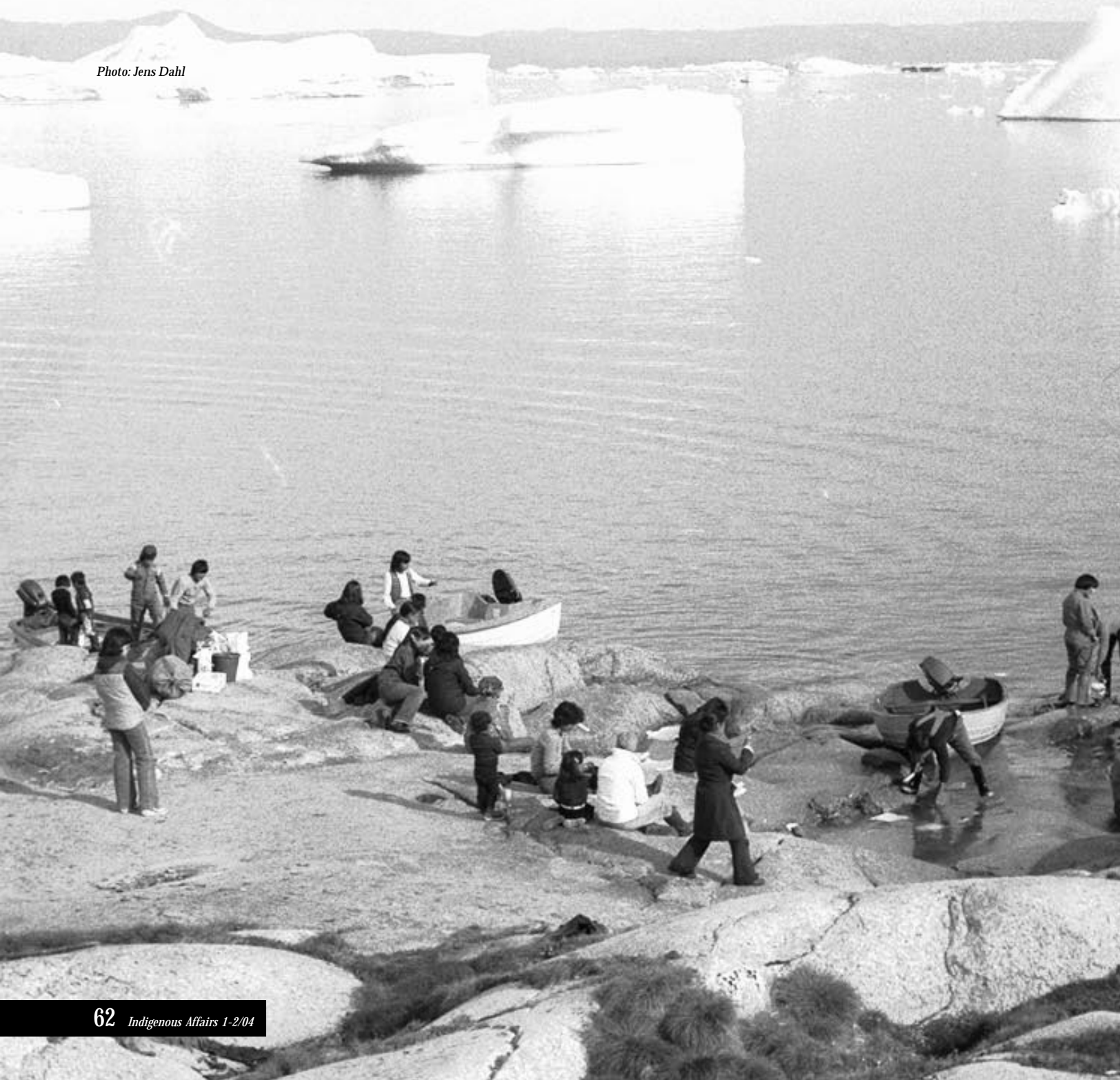
Women and politics

By 1948, women in Greenland had already gained the right to vote and become eligible for election. Yet, even now, they continue to be under-represented in politics and have only been able to manifest themselves within the political structures in a limited way. And this despite the fact that the struggle for equality in this area on the part of the women's organisations has been ongoing for many years. The women who have chosen a political career or who have taken initiatives to start up women's associations typically stand out as being educated or highly esteemed. Apart from this, in Greenland there are cultural

as well as class differences among women. In addition, it makes a difference whether they originate from a settlement or a town, since settlement women have been deprived of their original occupations within the hunting and fishing trades. Their former work has not been sufficiently replaced by new forms of employment. For this reason, many young women leave the settlements to go to school and pursue an education.

In her speech to the Arnat Peqatigiit Kattuffiat annual general assembly meeting in 2003, Secretary of Culture Henriette Rasmussen said,

Photo: Jens Dahl



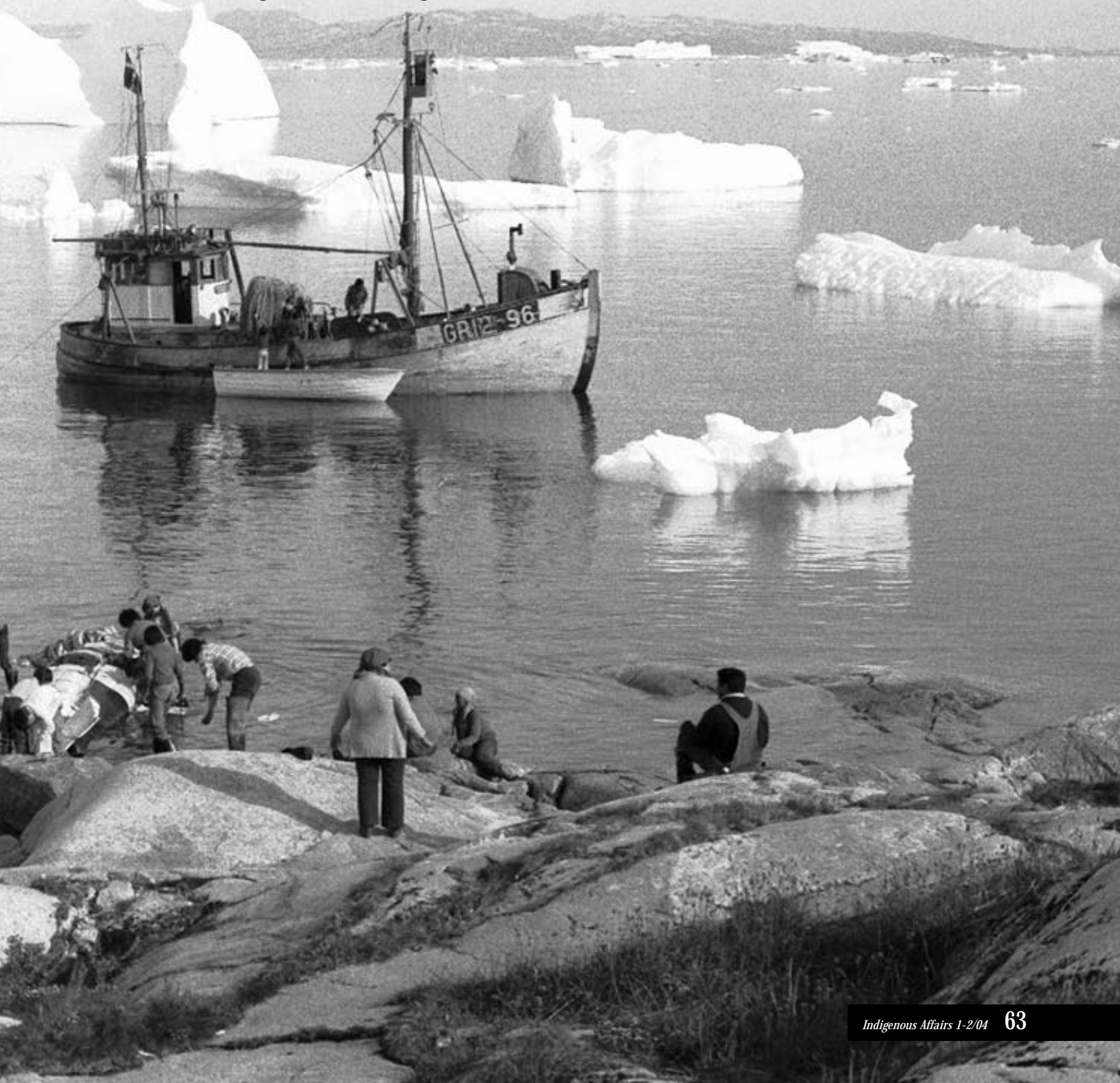
If find it encouraging, that women are increasingly to be found in public life. It was not until the beginning of the eighties that women were first elected to the Landsting. Since then their number has been growing. At the last election [in 2002] 11 women were elected, amounting to 32%. Although there is an increasing number of women in politics, men are still very dominant when it comes to representation in the corporate sector.⁶

According to *Greenland's Statistical Survey*, in the 2002 election, 241 candidates were nominated for 31 seats in the Landsting; of these 191 were men and 50 women.⁷ In other words, although women stand a greater chance

than men of being elected, there are still relatively few women who decide on a political career.

Domestic responsibilities

As a rule, women in Greenland have always been responsible for the home and the children, and in traditional Greenlandic society the children were the women's life insurance. With the introduction of marriage legislation in 1955, and especially since 1969, the family structure and organisation in Greenland have become greatly feminised. An examination of divorce cases from 1969 to



1972 showed that it was common for mothers to gain custody over their children. This is still the case.

In 2000 there were 8,376 households with children. In most cases there was a child in the household, and this child lived with two adults. If there was only one adult, that person was typically a woman. In only 263 households one man lived alone with one or more children, while the corresponding number for households with one woman alone and with one or more children was 1,181.⁸

The numbers tell us that in Greenland it is still the women who have prime responsibility for the children. On the other hand, various studies and analyses conclude that equality between men and women in the home is gradually being achieved.

The focus of gender research in Greenland has, to a large degree, been directed at discovering whether one of the sexes has had a better capacity for survival in modern Greenlandic society. And it is a common impression that the Greenlandic women have been better at adjusting to urbanisation and industrialisation. The reason for this is that during the modernisation period women began to identify with “modern things”. In recent times, it has been women who most significantly, and in the largest numbers, have set their sights on an education and waged income.

Education

The limited number of educational opportunities in Greenland were long reserved for men. And yet the earliest vocational training of women started in the 1700s, firstly as birth attendants and later as proper midwives. As late as 1932, a further school for girls was established, and girls who graduated from there could subsequently be admitted to a type of teacher’s training college for pre-school teachers. Otherwise, there were few educational opportunities for the women during that period. Criticism from the women’s movements of these limited educational possibilities brought about changes in attitude as regards gender roles and, not least, the struggle for independence carried with it a new interest in education issues. New areas of education were established and whereas in the 1960s Greenlandic women graduating from secondary school were few and far between, they came out in droves during the 1970s and 80s. As mentioned above, Greenlandic women have, in recent times, put a high priority on education. Some authors conclude that women have even had an advantage over many men, who have long relied on traditional livelihoods as the basis of their identity.⁹ Nowadays, many hunters and fishermen supplement their income with waged work.

In her analysis of the results of a 1994 study of living conditions in Greenland, Mariekathrine Poppel concludes

that, at that time, there were more women than men on the labour market.¹⁰ Similarly, according to *Greenland’s Statistical Survey*, from 1997/98 to 2000/01 more women than men had embarked on an education, with women making up 52.8% of the total number of students.¹¹ Charlotte Palludan has studied the life strategies of young Greenlandic women and bases her writing on 27 interviews. She states that young women have dissimilar attitudes to education strategies and family strategies respectively. Palludan finds that a greater number of younger women consider the education strategy to be the most sensible choice, whereas they consider the family strategy to be the most compelling. For a smaller group, it is education that attracts – a choice seen as perhaps leading to travel – whereas family life is a wish for the future.¹² In 2001, Jette Rygaard conducted a study into gender, education and research at the University of Greenland, *Ilisimatusarfik*, and concluded that more women than men enrol at the University of Greenland. Numbers provided by the Home Rule government showed that more women than men leave Greenland to study. Although more women than men were enrolled at Ilisimatusarfik, there were also somewhat more women than men dropping out of their studies. Jette Rygaard’s explanation of this situation is, “*that it is difficult for Greenlandic women simultaneously to take care of their studies, family and a possible job*”.¹³

By way of conclusion it appears that: (a) in comparison to men there are now more Greenlandic women who are trained or highly educated, and women do better than men on the labour/job market and (b) whereas the women are in a majority in educational institutions, they still tend to favour the family strategy when it comes to choosing a field of study and carrying out their studies.

Women have achieved much through education. It seems to me that the question for the future must be: how can women start making careers within politics and the corporate sector? And how can women combine their responsibility for home and family life with education and a career?

Family and everyday life at present

In my Ph.D. project on the significance of kinship and family in Greenlandic urban communities, I have conducted research into families in separate generations in the two towns of Upernavik and Nuuk. The project also deals with the division of responsibilities between women and men with regard to the household and children. From what I can determine from the data so far, it appears to me that there is greater equality in the home between the sexes among the younger generation. In those cases where the men have not taken so much responsibility for the household and children, I am often told that (a) the men have a lot of work to do, and (b) they often go hunting after work. It is difficult for the younger women to accept their hus-

bands' long workdays or their unemployment, whereas they express greater acceptance if the men go hunting after work. A woman of 40 states,

If your husband goes to sea in his spare time, it seems reasonable to me that he doesn't help out at home. That's how men are and I respect that, because they bring home the catch. But if a man is unemployed, he has to take on responsibility for the household chores while his wife is at work. Obviously men and women have to negotiate and reach an understanding about the chores, because men and women are different and they each have their strong sides.

Even though young men and women have achieved equality as regards responsibility for household chores, there remains a good deal of respect for gender-based talents. As a young woman in one of my interviews put it, "We are responsible together. Spring cleaning is part of my chores, but he can also clean. On the other hand I am not very good at the things that men do in the home. He supports me in my housework and when it comes to taking care of the children." Similar conclusions have been reached by Karla Williamson in a study carried out in Maniitsoq in 1998.¹⁴ The situation is different for members of the older generation I have interviewed. Here duties were divided between the sexes along traditional lines, in that the women took care of the home and children and the men were in charge of the household economy.

With regard to Greenland's population living in towns, relatives and establishing a family are exceptionally important factors in receiving support from others to get along in everyday life, at times of celebrations, in crises, etc. Town families socialise with many kinds of people (especially in the capital Nuuk), for which reason family and kin gain significant value in time and space. These latter concepts should be understood in the way that time is perceived in everyday life, and how the individual family organises its social life with opportunities and limitations to interact in space (in town, at work, with the family and other people) in a race against time.

I am in agreement with those researchers who claim that young Greenlandic women regard motherhood as a matter of course, because there is consensus about the value of motherhood and the status it grants in Greenlandic society. Here, having children is no hindrance. Many young Greenlanders have children by choice at a relatively young age and, in 2002, the average age at which women had their first baby was 24.7. The data also shows a rise in fertility in recent years within the 19-24 and 25-29 age groups. According to a visiting nurse, the birth rate among young women has gone up over the last year. Despite many birth control campaigns, young women act contrary to the injunctions. Yet compared to the past, the general birth rate has fallen because of legalised abortion and the use of birth control.¹⁵ In contrast to the past, children these days tend to be planned for by the parents.

Concluding remarks

The above demonstrates how Greenlandic women have, throughout the history of Greenland, been able to adapt and adjust to the changing circumstances of their lives. The advent of colonisation and the introduction of Christianity marked the beginning of women's domestication into housewifely domains and the preferential treatment of men's output and education for European types of work. This process caused women to become marginalised in a society that was undergoing a gender transformation in terms of views of different roles. After the shift from hunting to fishing as the foremost trade took place, and the ensuing industrialisation and modernisation, women's traditional occupation as supporting their spouses by working at home became redundant. During the modernisation phase, women had to break with tradition and enter the labour market. As unskilled workers with the lowest wages, they were now able to contribute to their household's economy to a higher degree than before. Another novel situation presented itself in the period right before the establishment of the Greenland Home Rule. The demands for equal rights and independence led to the founding of entirely new educational institutions, where women were admitted on an equal footing with men. Through the 1990s and to this day, there has been a predominance of women on the educational market, and women have grown increasingly visible in Greenlandic society. Where women do still lag behind is in the areas of politics and the corporate sector. In the 21st century, women in Greenland must attempt to match men when it comes to making careers and taking their share of the top jobs in society.

By way of conclusion, I shall address the question of whether women can cope with both starting a family and pursuing an education and career, and what can be done to help women reach these goals. Greenlandic women are capable of coping with raising a family and gaining an education if they obtain the help and support of relatives and society. The above discusses how far we have come in establishing equality in the home between men and women. But if women are to advance to top posts, then both men, women and the general public must accept that responsibility for raising children is delegated on a larger scale to the husbands and fathers. Moreover, much more support must be provided to families with children by the Greenlandic public sector than has so far been the case: having children is not a private matter. It is no longer sufficient for families with children to be able to rely on the help of the extended family, it is imperative in this regard that society as a whole is supportive. This can, for example, be done by building more day-care institutions and providing longer parental leaves for both parents, etc.¹⁶ In the pursuit of greater independence and co-determination in internal matters - independence and co-determination viewed in relation

to the country but even more so in relation to each individual – it is essential to fully utilize all the resources available in the Greenlandic society of today. □

Notes

- 1 The revision resulted in the formal termination of Greenland's status as a colony.
- 2 Arnfred, Signe 1991: Kvinder, mænd, arbejde og seksualitet i den grønlandske moderniseringsproces. Kvinder i Grønland – sammen og hver for sig. Atuakkiorfik 1991.
- 3 Marianne Lykke Thomsen states that disavowal of feminism was widespread among Inuit and native women in general. (Thomsen 1991:133)
- 4 *Aalisartut, Piniartullu Nuliaasa Aappaasalu Kattuffiat*.
- 5 *HS Analyse* 2000: 3.
- 6 Henriette Rasmussen, 2003
- 7 *Greenland's Statistical Survey* 2003:46
- 8 Statistics on children and youths in Greenland, 2003
- 9 Signe Arnfred, 1991
- 10 Interview in the daily *Politiken*. Mariekathrine Poppel is currently working on a Ph.D. project on the subject of gender and violence in Greenland.
- 11 Greenland's Statistical Survey. 2003:308
- 12 Palludan 1993:117.
- 13 Jette Rygaard. 2001:16
- 14 Williamson 2001 and *HS Analyse* 1999:15
- 15 All citizens who are registered with Greenland's national register are entitled to free treatment and services, including birth control and abortion, by the public health authorities.
- 16 In Greenland, there can be up to a two-year wait for children to be admitted to a day nursery or kindergarten. Mothers have the right to 15 weeks maternity leave after the birth of a child, and fathers have three weeks paternity leave. (Landsting regulation no. 6, Nov. 11, 2000)

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