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This is the published version of a paper published in .

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Burman, M. (2017)

Men's intimate partner violence against Sami women: a Swedish blind spot

*Nordic Journal on Law and Society*, 1(1-2): 194-215

<https://doi.org/10.36368/njolas.v1i01-02.18>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-141080>

# Men's intimate partner violence against Sami women - a Swedish blind spot

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The aim of this article is to map the Swedish context regarding men's intimate partner violence against Sami women and (1) discuss what knowledge and perspectives that dominates that context, and (2) reflect upon possible starting points for meeting the need for knowledge. The outline shows that men's intimate partner violence against Sami women is a blind spot in Sweden. Important aspects, such as human rights and colonialism, are neglected in the policy discourse. At the most, the policy discourse includes abused Sami women in the problematic category "particular vulnerable groups". The author argues for a need to problematize if and how responsibility is taken for addressing and responding to the violence and suggests a postcolonial and intersectional approach that centers around how the imbalance of power and control runs through abused women's experiences. Finally, the author highlights how such an approach also is a matter of indigenous research ethics.

**Keywords:** intimate partner violence, Sami women, indigenous rights, policy, postcolonialism

## Introduction

Men's violence against women has been widely recognized in Sweden in gender equality policy and legal reforms since the mid-1990s. Measures that have been undertaken have to some extent been based on a rhetoric that is influenced by feminist and women's human rights perspectives (Burman 2012).<sup>2</sup> However, men's violence against Sami women is a blind spot in Sweden. Sweden has adopted the main human rights documents regarding men's violence against women as well as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), but the problem of men's violence against Sami women is almost invisible in policies or other official documents.

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<sup>2</sup> See also, for example, Regeringens skrivelse 2011/12:3 and Regeringens skrivelse 2016/17:10.



Moreover, very little has been done to raise this issue or to introduce support services for Sami women.<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this article is to map the Swedish context as regards men's intimate partner violence against Sami women, and (1) discuss the knowledge and perspectives that dominate the Swedish context, and (2) reflect upon possible starting points for meeting the need for knowledge. The Swedish context is mapped in the following respects: (1) Human rights, (2) Policies, (3), Research and other studies, (4) The Sami Organizations, and (5) law, more exactly the Reindeer Herding Act.

The main method used is content analysis of documents and websites. Such an approach entails several limitations, in particular that it cannot capture how the issue is addressed and dealt with within the Sami organizations and the overall Sami community. There is an obvious risk that my mapping exercise will not be able to produce a fair picture in that respect. Nevertheless, I find it important to raise the issue of men's intimate partner violence against Sami women in the broadest possible sense, based on documents, as a first step to break the silence on violence against Sami women in Sweden and to put it on the legal and policy agenda.

## Human rights

The vulnerability of indigenous women to male partner violence is included in the general women's human rights discourse on men's violence against women, and at the same time it is particularly related to immigrant, refugee, asylum-seeking and minority women exposed to male partner violence. In the women's human rights discourse based on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)<sup>4</sup>, the situations of these groups of women are often described as similar, for example in how they face and experience problems related to racism, sexism, poverty and other forms of subordination.<sup>5</sup>

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)<sup>6</sup> addresses indigenous women's vulnerabilities to male violence in a more direct manner than the CEDAW jurisprudence. According to Article 22(2) "states shall take measures, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, to ensure that indigenous women and children enjoy the full protection and

<sup>3</sup> Special support services exist for abused women in some ethnic minorities, but nothing of that kind exists for Sami women. There is a national, state financed telephone support line called *Kvinnofridslinjen* where interpretation for the northern Sami language is possible, but not in any of the other Sami languages.

<sup>4</sup> Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (adopted 18 December 1979, entered into force 3 September 1981) A/RES/34/830 (1980).

<sup>5</sup> See for example General Assembly, Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, A/66/215 (2011). In the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (2011) no attention is paid to indigenous women or women belonging to ethnic minorities. Instead the Convention focusses on immigrant and asylum-seeking women.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), A/RES/61/295 (2007).

guarantees against all forms of violence and discrimination". Violence against indigenous women and girls was also the specific subject for discussion at an international expert group meeting in 2012, initiated by the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Among other things the experts called upon the United Nations system, Member States and indigenous people's organizations to recognize the rights and special needs of indigenous women and girls. Further, indigenous communities were called upon to seriously consider the problem of violence against indigenous women and girls in their communities in ways that include the recognition and dismantling of existing patriarchal social relations.<sup>7</sup>

The Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples has also addressed violence against indigenous women. In the 2015 report to the Human Rights Council the rapporteur focused on global common themes and patterns of violations experienced by indigenous women, among them domestic violence.<sup>8</sup> The rapporteur highlighted intersecting power structures such as patriarchy and colonialism that leads to specific forms of discrimination and vulnerability for indigenous women. Regarding violence, the rapporteur - among other things - states that indigenous women suffer from both structural violence, victimization based on the realities of everyday life together with exclusion from rights and resources otherwise guaranteed to citizens, and other forms of violence, such as traditional practices, sexual violence, trafficking, domestic violence and gender-based killings.

Sweden has been criticized by the UN system regarding violence against Sami women. As early as in 2001 the CEDAW Committee urged the Swedish Government to collect more data and to continue its efforts to implement and strengthen current policies aimed at combating violence against women, with special attention given - amongst others - to migrant and minority women. This concern explicitly included discrimination against Sami women and the violence minority women face in their own communities. The Government was also encouraged to be more proactive in increasing immigrant, refugee and minority women's awareness of the availability of social services and legal remedies.<sup>9</sup>

In the Swedish report to CEDAW in 2005 (Näringsdepartementet 2005) the Government touched upon gender equality for Sami women, mainly in terms of representation in the Sami parliament. The report also contained of comprehensive information about the Governments' efforts, in terms of law and policy, to deal generally with men's violence against women, with

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<sup>7</sup> ECOSOC, Combating violence against indigenous women and girls: Article 22 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Report of the international expert group meeting. E/C.19/2012/6 (2012).

<sup>8</sup> General Assembly, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, A/HRC/30/41 (2015).

<sup>9</sup> CEDAW/A/56/38 Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Sweden (2001).

some special attention paid to immigrant women. However, nothing was said in the report about violence against Sami women and there was no response to the issues raised by the CEDAW Committee in 2001. The same is true of the national action plan for human rights that was launched in 2006 (Regeringens skrivelse 2005/06:95). The concerns expressed by CEDAW are mentioned in that document, but no response to them can be found in the action plan.<sup>10</sup> So it is not surprising that similar concerns were articulated in the CEDAW response in 2008. In addition, the CEDAW Committee called upon Sweden to collect statistics on all forms of violence that immigrant, refugee and minority women experience, and to submit such information in its next periodic report.<sup>11</sup> However, the latest report to CEDAW in 2014 (Regeringskansliet 2014) still does not meet the expectations of the CEDAW Committee. The requested statistics is not presented and violence against Sami women is not explicitly addressed, only indirectly by reference to a policy initiative in 2007, described in more detail in the next section. Somewhat surprising, the latest CEDAW response in 2016 pay no attention to this deficiency. The CEDAW committee's response with particular relevance to violence against women belonging to minority groups is restricted to a concern regarding discrimination when it comes to the availability and quality of assistance and protection services.<sup>12</sup>

The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women was very explicit about violence against Sami women in her latest report on Sweden.<sup>13</sup> She pointed to the fact that no survey on this violence has been conducted in Sweden. Anecdotal accounts she had received from Sami women suggested that Sami women may face significant levels of violence within their communities. According to the rapporteur, many Sami communities retain strong patriarchal structures and divorce to escape a violent relationship is in some communities still not a socially accepted option. Sami women's groups had expressed that Sami women exposed to violence often are hesitant to obtain help from mainstream Swedish institutions and authorities which they consider alien to their culture and language. The special rapporteur recommended the Swedish government to acknowledge the diverse voices within different cultural groups and support those which respect and promote women's rights within their communities. Further the rapporteur recommended that any efforts undertaken should avoid cultural

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<sup>10</sup> Violence against women is briefly mentioned in the latest governmental policy document on human rights, Regeringens skrivelse 2016/17:29, but the document is silent regarding violence against Sami women.

<sup>11</sup> CEDAW/C/SWE/CO/7 Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Sweden (2008).

<sup>12</sup> CEDAW/C/SWE/CO/8-9, Concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of Sweden (2016).

<sup>13</sup> General Assembly, Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences, Yakin Ertürk. Addendum. Mission to Sweden. A/HRC/4/34/Add.3 (2007).

essentialism and stigmatization by promoting gender equality as a universal culture that has emerged in response to a universal history of gender inequality. Finally, the rapporteur recommended the commissioning of a study on violence against Sami women.

The human rights context presents Sweden with strong incentives to strengthen the efforts with regard to men's violence against Sami women. In the next section I will outline how Swedish policies have addressed the issue since 2007.

## **Policies**

The Swedish Government launched an action plan for combating men's violence against women in 2007 covering the period 2007-2010 (Regeringens skrivelse 2007/08:39). The action plan also concerned violence in same-sex relationships and honour-related violence. A few words in the action plan address women belonging to the national minorities. Swedish law recognizes five national minorities: Sami people, Romani people, Jews, Swedish Finns and Tornedalingar.<sup>14</sup> Women belonging to national minorities are mentioned in the 2007 action plan under a sub-heading on "particular vulnerable groups" where they are described as experiencing similar problems as immigrant women, more precisely that people focus more on their foreign background than on the fact that they have been abused. National minorities, other minority groups or Sami women are not otherwise mentioned in the action plan and what is meant by "particularly vulnerable groups" is not clearly expressed. In the government gender-equality document covering the period 2011-2014, men's violence against Sami women or women belonging to the national minorities is not mentioned (Regeringens skrivelse 2011/12:3).

In the latest government policy document on gender equality the concept "particular vulnerability" to violence is related to a diversity of circumstances of life (Regeringens skrivelse 2016/17:19). Circumstances particularly related to Sami women or women belonging to national minorities are not articulated. This policy document is based on three comprehensive reports from official inquiries into violence in intimate relationships (2014), violence against women (2015) and gender equality (2015). Sami women or women belonging to national minorities are not mentioned in the 2014 report or the 2015 report on gender equality.<sup>15</sup> Nor does the 2015 report on violence against women explicitly address violence

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<sup>14</sup> Lag (2009:724) om nationella minoriteter och minoritetsspråk [Act (2009:724) on national minorities and minority languages]. The Act mainly give language rights to national minorities, but there are also a couple of general provisions about public responsibility to support the culture of national minorities and national minorities participation in decision-making.

<sup>15</sup> SOU series 2014:49 and SOU series 2015:86.

against Sami women. However, that report notes that women belonging to national minorities represent a “particularly vulnerable group”, that they are often invisible in research into violence against women and that they are at risk of experiencing discrimination (SOU series 2015:55). Moreover, a definition of “particular vulnerability” is presented in the report:

Particular vulnerability means a higher risk of being exposed to violence or that the consequences of violence are more severe. It can also mean having particular difficulties getting the support needed. Other examples of vulnerability factors are lack of knowledge about rights, inadequate language skills, social and economic dependency, isolation and loneliness, dependency on other people in order to be able to cope with daily life and heavy dependency on the violent person.<sup>16</sup>

In all, violence against Sami women is, if at all, articulated as a gender equality issue for women belonging to national minorities, but not as an issue concerning indigeneity or indigenous women’s human rights. Consequently, the indigenous context is made invisible. Moreover, no measures that can be specifically related to women belonging to the national minorities are proposed in the policy documents.

There has been only one governmental policy initiative specifically addressing violence against women belonging to national minorities. In 2008 the Government tasked the National Public Health Institute<sup>17</sup> with (1) investigating how abused women from national minorities are treated and supported by the authorities, (2) developing an action plan, and (3) conducting activities to improve the knowledge about men’s violence against minority women, issues of treatment and the living conditions of national minorities.

The National Public Health Institute published a partial report in 2010 based on a questionnaire study and in-depth interviews with 24 women belonging to the national minorities that had been exposed to male partner violence (Statens folkhälsoinstitut 2010a). The questionnaire was sent to the police, social services, institutions within the healthcare system and schools. The respondents were asked to express their views on how violence against women belonging to national minorities is and should be dealt with. The aim of the interviews was to describe abused women’s experiences of treatment by the authorities. The questionnaire study did not provide any information specific to Sami women. One finding in the questionnaire study was that there are no special action programs in place for cases when authorities encounter abused women from national

<sup>16</sup> SOU series 2015:55, pp. 317-318 (author’s translation).

<sup>17</sup> This Institute was superseded by the Public Health Agency of Sweden in 2014.

minorities. The Institute's main conclusion based on this study was that the authorities are in need of more information and education on gender-based violence and the treatment of victims in general, as well as in connection with issues of ethnic diversity.

As regards the interview study, the Institute presented, as its most important result, that the overall impression of the support offered minority women was negative and that this perceived negative treatment was very similar to that expressed in complaints made by abused women in general. This means, for example, that the women generally praised the women's shelters and had a critical attitude towards the social services. All groups stressed the importance of being able to use their own language in contacts with support services.

In contrast to the questionnaire study, the interview study presented some results specific to Sami and Roma women. Women from these groups reported the most negative attitudes and comments directed to their minority group by the social services, the police and the judiciary. Sami and Roma women were described in the report as still facing discrimination which impacts on their attitudes towards the authorities. For example, according to the report, a Sami woman said that according to Sami culture, no contacts should be made with the Swedish authorities. The interviews also showed that Sami and Roma women were afraid that their own minority group would find out that they by turning to the authorities for help had revealed their exposure to violence. Many of them also feared that they would damage their family's honour if they left their husband. According to the report some Sami women described a culture in which it is forbidden to talk about the violence and its consequences. The Sami women interviewed identified three main areas for development: (1) language competence for staff in support services, (2) improved knowledge in the municipal social services about reindeer herding, the functions of a Sami community, and the consequences for Sami women if they divorce, and (3) a change in attitudes.

The Institute presented three general areas of development in the action plan: (1) education of staff within the municipal social services regarding gender-based violence and issues of treatment and support, (2) cooperation between the authorities and representatives from the national minority organizations to achieve better knowledge and understanding of ethnic diversity, and (3) spreading information about the minority groups to make these groups, as well as their right to their own language and culture, more visible in society. It was also suggested that support lines for abused women from the Sami and Roma groups should be established (Statens Folkhälsoinstitut 2010a).

The next step in the Institute's mission comprised of activities and projects based on the action plan in cooperation with national minority organizations. Amongst other things, money was distributed to projects carried out by minority organizations aimed at strengthening the ways in which minority groups deal with gender equality and men's violence against women and projects to develop cooperation with the authorities or other relevant organizations. Two projects that received funding concerned Sami women; one, led by the Swedish Sami National Association, did not explicitly deal with violence but instead aimed to strengthen the position of Sami women, especially reindeer-herding women. The other project was led by the Sami parliament and was a pilot study examining the possibilities of establishing a telephone help line for women in Sápmi.<sup>18</sup> According to the Institute's two final reports to the Government, the project led by the Sami parliament failed due to internal difficulties and shortage of staff to implement it (Statens Folkhälsoinstitut 2011, 2012). A general reflection from the Institute was that all projects found men's violence against women to be a very sensitive issue within the minority groups.

Finally, the Institute published three folders directed to the Police, the Social Services and the Health Care Sector respectively. The most important results from the project, as described above, were presented in the folders. A few recommendations were also presented. These are mostly general in the sense that they are independent of what group an abused woman might belong to. Only one recommendation is specific for women belonging to the national minorities. It regards language-rights and what aspects that are important to take into consideration when involving an interpreter (Statens Folkhälsoinstitut 2010b).

## Research and other studies

A research overview by the National Public Health Institute in the above-mentioned partial report shows that there is a lack in Swedish research into violence against Sami women. The Institute expressed particular concern regarding the lack of a gender perspective and the invisibility of men's violence against women in public health research into Sami health (Statens Folkhälsoinstitut 2010a). The same conclusion is reached in a report from the Swedish Sami parliament containing a compilation of knowledge regarding psycho-social ill-health among the Samis (Sametinget 2016b). My outline of research and other studies, irrespective of academic discipline or research topic, presents the same picture. Swedish gender studies research

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<sup>18</sup> Sápmi is one of the names used for the traditional Sami homeland, a large area of land that covers four countries: Russia, Finland, Norway and Sweden and stretches across the northern part of the Arctic, from the Russian Kola Peninsula in the east to the Swedish province of Dalarna in the south.

into Sami women does exist, for example, regarding the status and position of Sami women and gender equality in the overall Sami community (Amft 2002) but violence is not a topic in this research. Furthermore, no Swedish research into men's violence against women so far concerns violence against Sami women. Even if the research field is expanded to the Scandinavian countries, research is scarce and limited to a handful publications (Kuokkanen 2007, 2015; Henriksen 2011; Eriksen et.al. 2015; Thallaug Øverli et.al. 2017).

Currently no published research on violence against Sami women exist in Sweden. The only available Swedish study is a master thesis in global political studies with an empirical focus on Norway (Krumlinde 2009). In this study interviews were carried through with two Sami women employed at a crisis center in Karasjok, Finnmark, Norway, which (among others) supports abused Sami women and their children. According to the women who were interviewed, Sami women find it very difficult to reveal the violence and talk about it. One reason they gave to explain this difficulty was that violence against women is a taboo subject within the overall Sami community. Another reason the women suggested was that several implicit codes of conduct come into play, for example that a Sami woman is expected always to subordinate her own individual needs to the needs of the overall Sami community or that she should avoid divorce because a divorce could be economically devastating for her reindeer herding husband. Not following such rules might, according to the respondents, lead to the exclusion of the woman from the community. The respondents also believed that the idea that Sami women are strong prevented them from disclosing violence and also made violence and abuse very shameful for a Sami woman.<sup>19</sup> Similar explanations for why Sami women find it difficult to talk about "unspeakable" issues such as sexual violence is presented in Norwegian research (Henriksen 2011; Thallaug Øverli et.al. 2017).

## **Sami organizations**

The Swedish Sami Parliament has taken initiatives to raise the issue of men's violence against Sami women. The Sami Parliament is both an elected parliament and a State agency whose tasks are regulated by the Swedish Sami Parliament Act (1992:1422). Officials at the main office carry out the daily tasks of the agency and there is a political level with elected politicians.<sup>20</sup> The Sami parliament adopted its first Gender Equality Program

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<sup>19</sup> The idea of Sami women as being strong women and its implications for gender equality is problematized in Sami research, for example Eikjok (2000).

<sup>20</sup> Information about the Sami Parliament is available at <https://www.sametinget.se/english>.

in 2004 (Sametinget 2004). The program aimed at providing for systematized work to enhance gender equality in the overall Sami community. The overarching aim for gender equality reflected the Swedish gender equality policy goal and was formulated as follows:

Sami women and men shall have the same rights, opportunities and duties in all aspects of life, i.e. work and economic independence, influence in the society, unpaid work in the home, caring of children and physical integrity.<sup>21</sup>

Regarding gender-based violence the program stated that work within the Sami Parliament is needed in order to reduce the problem and one specific measure was decided, namely to investigate the need for special Sami support services (Sametinget 2004, 19-20). The so far only activity within the Sami parliament that specifically has addressed violence against Sami women is the abovementioned project financed by the National Public Health Institute. A working seminar was arranged that aimed at formulating proposals to the Sami Parliament on how it could work to prevent and counteract men's violence against Sami women. The seminar resulted in a proposal to apply for money to carry out a pilot study on the need for a specialized telephone help line or women's shelter for Sami women (Sametinget 2008). However, the project did not lead to any application for funding or other activities.

The need for a specialized women's shelter for Sami women was once again highlighted in 2011 in a questionnaire to the Sami reindeer-herding communities<sup>22</sup> carried out by the Sami Parliament as part of a government assignment to strengthen the participation of Sami women in social life. However, violence against Sami women is absent from the project's conclusions and recommendations (Sametinget 2011). Violence was also invisible as an issue in the government initiated gender equality project which ran 2013-2014 and aimed at developing gender mainstreaming strategies for the Sami Parliament. The Parliament chose to focus on other gender equality goals than that targeting physical integrity and violence (Sametinget 2014).

A new Gender Equality Program for the Sami parliament was adopted in 2016 (Sametinget 2016a). The same overarching goal for gender equality as in the previous program is expressed, but is now complemented with three more goals: (1) that Sami women and men, Sami girls and boys, can make

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<sup>21</sup> Sametinget (2004,12) (author's translation).

<sup>22</sup> A reindeer-herding community is an economic and administrative association whose mission is to manage the reindeer herding in a certain geographical area in the best interests of its members. The right to herd reindeer belongs to the Sami people, but according to the Reindeer Herding Act (1971:437) it can only be performed by a Sami who is member of a reindeer-herding community. There are 51 reindeer-herding communities in Sweden.

free choices regardless of sex, (2) that the Sami parliament has a broad scope of practice that appeals equally to and concern both men and women, and (3) that gender equality is an important part of the efforts to decolonize and strengthen the Sami people and Sami community. Long-term work with gender equality is said to contribute to physical and psychological health, a living culture and a stronger Sami community (Sametinget 2016a, 16). Gender based violence is dealt with in the program as closely connected to health and some measures are decided, among them to investigate (once again) the need for special support services, to support preventive work and to provide information about where to turn for support (Sametinget 2016a, 25-6).

Albeit gender based violence and intimate partner violence are articulated by the Sami parliament as gender equality issues for the Swedish Sami community, the measures decided to deal with the violence are few and formulated in rather general terms, for example without specifying how to carry out preventive work against violence. It also seems as if Sami women outside the Sami parliament at the moment are the most active agents in raising the issue. Two Sami women organizations with members from whole Sápmi are publicly engaged in the issue of gender based violence. Sami Nisson Forum (SNF) arranged in March 2015 a seminar in Sweden on "Sami women's right to participation in social life, health and violence prevention".<sup>23</sup> And in August 2016 the organization Niejda - Chicks in Sápmi, published a manifest in which the silence surrounding violence was challenged and everyone in Sápmi were called upon to take action and take a stand for zero tolerance against sexual abuse and violence in intimate relationships (Niejda 2016).

The Swedish Sami National Association (SSR) is also turning its attention to gender equality. So far, the work of SSR has mainly been directed towards issues other than violence but it has nevertheless been important since it has highlighted power positions of Sami women within the Sami community, which impacts on their possibilities to escape or protect themselves from male partner violence. SSR has, for example, initiated discussions on gender inequalities in reindeer husbandry and how regulations in the Reindeer Herding Act are subordinating Sami women (Svenska samernas riksförbund 2012). In the next section I will give a hypothetical example showing how the Reindeer Herding Act may impact in a negative way on Sami women exposed to male partner violence.

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<sup>23</sup> The program for the seminar is available in Swedish at <http://www.sahkie.se/event/seminarium-samekvinnors-ratt-till-delaktighet-betydelse-for-socialt-liv-halsa-och-forebyggande-insatser-mot-vald/> (accessed February 19, 2017).

## The Reindeer Herding Act

Reindeer herding in Sweden is, according to the Reindeer Herding Act, connected with membership in a reindeer-herding community. Such a community is an economic and administrative association the purpose of which is to manage the reindeer herding in a certain geographical area in the best interests of its members.<sup>24</sup> The right to herd reindeer belongs to the Sami people, but it can only be carried out by a Sami who is member of a reindeer-herding community. All important decision making take place in the Sami reindeer-herding community.

There are three categories of membership in a Sami reindeer-herding community.<sup>25</sup> Active reindeer herders have full membership and the right to participate and vote in all decision making. The voting right is heavily restricted for members in the other two categories. One such “minor” or “restricted” membership is afforded to members of the active reindeer herder’s family, i.e. spouses and children. Votes are distributed based on the number of reindeer. When there is a vote on an issue which only full members have the right to decide on, that full member’s vote is based on both the number of his or her own reindeer and on the number of reindeers owned by family members. Since the vast majority of active reindeer herders today are men, the voting system, sometimes termed “reindeer husbandry”, subordinates Sami women and their ownership of reindeer to both their male partners and the reindeer-herding community (Amft 2002; Svenska Samernas Riksförbund 2012; Ledman 2012).

I will present a hypothetical example illustrating one way in which the Reindeer Herding Act may risk impacting in a negative way on Sami women exposed to male partner violence. My example concerns a single woman who owns reindeer but has no practical possibilities of taking care of them herself or with the help of her family. One way for her to solve the problem is to seek help from other reindeer herders. Another plausible scenario is that she starts a relationship with a Sami man who has not previously been an active reindeer herder, but after a while starts to show an interest in reindeer herding. The man moves into her house and takes over responsibility for her reindeer. Quite soon the man start to subject the woman to violence and coercive control.

After a couple of years the man applies for membership in the reindeer-herding community. Such membership for the man poses a significant problem for the woman. Because he is a man and takes care of the reindeer in the household there is a good chance that he will become a full member of the community. If that happens her reindeer will be regarded as his power base, in accordance with the Reindeer Herding Act. Furthermore, if

<sup>24</sup> 9 § Rennäringslagen (1971:437) [Reindeer Herding Act (1971:437), section 9].

<sup>25</sup> 11 § Rennäringslagen (1971:437) [Reindeer Herding Act (1971:437), section 11].

she separates from him, once he is a full member of the community, she would find herself existing beside him within the reindeer-herding community. So, the system of reindeer husbandry makes it possible for the man to make it harder for her to end the relationship. She risks having to leave the community in order to protect herself from violence. In such a case she also risk having to end her engagement in reindeer herding and could lose a very important part of her Sami identity.

This example shows that the woman, because she is not a full member of the reindeer-herding community, would not have any power over her own future. Instead she would be dependent on the votes of the full members of the community, who are mostly men, and would be subject to their powers. If, for example, she had a right to vote based on her ownership of reindeer she would have more power in the situation. If she were the full member and the man a member based on his relationship with her, his membership could be questioned if there was a separation. But the way these issues are currently regulated in law, and sometimes the practices within the reindeer-herding communities, means that single Sami women who own reindeer can be easy targets for men. Moreover, abusive men can use the legislation as a weapon to keep women in abusive relationships.

### **Conclusion: A need for knowledge and approaches to responsibility**

The outline shows that men's intimate partner violence against Sami women is a blind spot in Sweden in many respects. There is an almost unlimited need for research. Knowledge about Sami women's experiences of violence and how the overall Sami community or the Swedish authorities respond to the violence is needed as well as a diversity of theoretical and contextual problematizations of law and policy.

Sweden adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, but so far there is no sign of that in laws or policies relating to intimate partner violence. The Swedish policy discourse on Sami women's exposure to male partner violence, if it is fair to say that such a discourse even exists, does not acknowledge the human rights, or the indigenous and colonial contexts. Swedish policies mainly comprise short and sweeping definitions of "particular vulnerable groups" which include immigrant, refugee and minority women. This is worrying since such victim positions tend to become problematic for women who, in a context of discrimination, racism and colonial practices, are not fully included in a Swedish majority "us" (Carbin 2010). Naming the women as "particularly vulnerable" or "particularly exposed" without acknowledging how they are affected by discrimination and power systems related to gender, ethnicity and

indigeneity puts them in danger of being constructed as deviating from the Swedish norm or risks leading to a culturalization of male partner violence.<sup>26</sup>

The obvious conclusion is that there is a strong need for the development of policies relating to men's violence against Sami women which takes the colonial context seriously. It is also obvious that the patriarchal structure in the Reindeer Herding Act must be challenged and changed. In this regard it is important to recognize that the act does not reflect Sami tradition but is a product of colonialism (Amft 2002; Löf 2014). There is a need to continue and develop analyses of the gendered impact of the Reindeer Herding Act and other laws in many respects (Svensson 2015).

Sami organizations and Sami women have taken important initiatives regarding men's violence against women but, as highlighted in the conclusions from the National Public Health Institute, violence against women seems to be a very sensitive issue. In my view, this is also shown in how the majority of the projects led by the National Public Health Institute did not really address men's violence against women, but less controversial issues of gender equality. It is also shown in how the Sami Parliament has chosen over recent years to focus on other gender equality goals than that targeting physical integrity and violence. Men's intimate partner violence against women is a sensitive and difficult issue in every community or society. However, as becomes clear when the knowledge that exists about violence against Sami women is taken seriously, the colonial context and the specificities that follows from belonging to a subordinated and colonized minority makes it even more difficult.

Against the backdrop of my mapping, I find it important to problematize responsibility regarding men's violence against Sami women. Who takes responsibility for the violence and the situation for abused women and how is responsibility taken? State responsibility in terms of law and policy is of course important, but it should not be analyzed in isolation. It is also important to highlight and problematize responsibility on other levels, i.e. individual, community, regional and global levels. All levels relate to each other and not including, for example, community and regional levels would exclude important contexts and experiences for Sami women. As highlighted by some Sami feminist scholars, the question of oppression within the Sami community should not be disguised (Eikjok 2004; Kuokkanen 2015). Postcolonial power structures and how they impact on violent practices, experiences of violence or responses to violence must be acknowledged, but that starting point is not an obstacle to simultaneously upholding the concept that violent men are responsible agents (Sørensen

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<sup>26</sup> Similar risks arise when immigrant women with insecure residency who are exposed to male partner violence are represented as a "particularly vulnerable" or "particularly exposed" group, see Burman (2012).

2001; Kuokkanen 2015). As argued by Deer (2015, 132) “[t]he challenge, then, is to decolonize rape law by acknowledging this history without allowing perpetrators to minimize personal responsibility”.

What possible starting-points are there for problematizing responsibility? One way is to, as in the general UN men's violence against women discourse, take account of similarities with women belonging to other subordinated groups, for example immigrant women. Some aspects of men's violence against Sami women seem to resemble the exposure of immigrant women to male partner violence. For example, that the violence becomes a very sensitive issue within the minority community, that immigrant women have a strong sense of solidarity with the minority community and that immigrant women are hesitant, for good reasons, to turn to the authorities for support (Lenardt 2008; SOU 2012:45). As a consequence of their subordinate status and experiences of discrimination, domination and persecution, abused immigrant women often feel solidarity with the minority group. Moreover, questions that are regarded as “women's issues” become subordinated to issues relating to the ethnic group as a whole. It has been suggested that similar problems exist in the Sami context. For example, Amft (2002, 193) have argued that a Sami woman cannot be politically active as a Sami and at the same time act from her position as a woman. Therefore, according to Amft, Sami women have to subordinate themselves as women in order to be “genuine” Sami. A more optimistic picture is presented by Ledman (2012). Her study of how Sami women are represented in the Swedish and Sami press provides evidence of a vibrant Sami women's activism.

However, it is also important to acknowledge differences in relation to other groups of women exposed to male partner violence. For example, the myth about strong Sami women is often used against Sami women who advocate women's issues, not least by Sami men (Eikjok 2000). Similar myths impacting on violence against indigenous women exist in other geographical contexts (Davis 2011). Moreover, the particularities that follow from the indigenous and colonizing context must be acknowledged. It is important to note that Sami women are not “minority women” in the sense that concept often is used. Sami women are living in their homeland that - as well as their culture, knowledge, language and faith system - has been colonized by foreigners. It can also be assumed that Sami women often must interact with authorities and officials with insufficient knowledge regarding the overall Sami community, the racism facing Sami women and how colonialism has an impact on violence against women. A postcolonial and intersectional approach which acknowledges both universal and particular social and cultural aspects is thus, from an indigenous perspective, a very important point of departure (Davis 2011; Kuokkanen 2012) since indigenous

women face systemic violations at the nexus of gender and indigeneity (Deer 2015). But such an approach is also important in order to challenge the disinclination in Sweden -for example in policies and research- to acknowledge that Sweden has been and still is a state and a society involved in colonialism and marked by colonial experiences (Keskinen et.al. 2009; Loftsdottir and Jensen 2012).

Another important starting point, I argue, is that gendered power relations should be acknowledged. Research into men's violence against women in socially and culturally subordinated groups, for example immigrant women, suggests that it is not enough to acknowledge diversity, differences and particularities. There is also a need to uphold the idea of men's violence against women as being related to gendered power relations (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005; de los Reyes and Mulinari 2005; Thiara and Gill 2010; Nixon and Humphreys 2010). I have argued elsewhere (Burman 2012) for the notion that men's violence against women always harms women and that the imbalance of power and control that runs through abused women's experiences should be placed at the center of an intersectional approach to law and policy. In my view this is likewise important when taking a postcolonial approach. Such an approach can -amongst other things- serve as prevention against the culturalization of violence. Culturalization risks normalizing the violence and making it invisible. Moreover, it support biased ideas that Sami men are more inclined to domestic violence than men belonging to the majority population or that Sami women are less resilient against violence than women belonging to the majority population. Risks of the culturalization of men's violence against women by relating violence to "others" easily arises when violence in contexts other than a white and western European one is problematized. Such othering processes can be observed today, for example in policies within the European Union (Kantola 2010; Montoya and Rolandsen Augustin 2013).

To conclude, a postcolonial approach is not only an important theoretical and analytical approach, it is also a matter of indigenous research ethics and of the utmost importance (Smith 2012; Porsanger 2004; Löf 2014; Drugge 2016). Research relating to indigenous peoples performed by non-indigenous researchers can be a form of colonialism in itself. The researcher, especially a non-Sami researcher, must have sufficient knowledge about aspects such as Sami history and the way the Sami's have been and still is treated by the Swedish state. Understanding and acknowledging the colonial process and the Sami experiences that are marked by colonialism are essential in trying to avoid doing more harm than good. Further, in research on violence against Sami women, Sami women and relevant Sami organizations must be the priority stakeholders and involved as experts in the project in ways that give them real possibilities to

impact on the research and to benefit from the research. They should have a strong say on, for example, how to carry out the gathering of empirical data on Sami women's experiences and on how to cooperate with the Sami community. The aim must be to carry out research in collaboration with Sami women and the Sami community, not to do research on them.

## **Funding**

This chapter is part of the research in the project "Mäns våld mot samiska kvinnor i nära relationer - socio-rättsliga problematiseringar av utsatthet och ansvarstagande" [Men's Intimate Partner Violence against Sami Women: socio-legal problematization of vulnerability and responsibility] funded by the Swedish Crime Victim Fund.

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