Indigenous political institutions do not sufficiently take into account structural power relations in society, Indigenous communities and politics.

A hierarchy between gender issues and self-determination prevents Indigenous nation-building. According to this hierarchy, gender issues can be addressed after self-determination has been achieved.

“Rematriation” of self-determination means a simultaneous restoring of Indigenous political structures and elimination of gendered violence.

Indigenous self-determination means breaking up power relations and restructuring them. A key political goal of Indigenous movement globally has long been to gain an equal standing with other peoples in the world. My and other research shows, however, that this is not enough. Indigenous self-determination must also consist of gender justice. Colonial structures, including governing bodies, have changed gender relations in Indigenous societies and established similar unequal gender regimes and hierarchies that can be found in Western or mainstream political structures. There is a definitive gender fault line cutting through Indigenous leadership. A number of female leaders recognize gender violence as inseparably linked to self-determination and self-government. Male leaders typically regard gender violence as a social issue that is regarded as a low priority and as a result, often falls off the agenda. This is why it is very important that gender and thinking about gender become a central part of implementing Indigenous self-determination. Otherwise self-determination only maintains and strengthens colonial power in the name of Indigenous self-government.

In this four-part policy brief series, Dr. Rauna Kuokkanen (Sámi) will share the key findings of her research that has been published in her award-winning book Restructuring Relations: Indigenous Self-Determination, Governance and Gender (Oxford University Press, 2019). She interviewed over 70 Indigenous individuals from Sápmi, Greenland and Canada, the majority of whom were Indigenous women. The research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in 2011-2015. For more information about her work, see www.rauna.net.

Idealizing Indigenous self-determination is problematic and dangerous for Indigenous women. They cannot count on their leadership and political institutions to actively address some of the most pressing concerns in their communities and societies.
However, gender-based discrimination and marginalization become rooted as inseparable, normal part of self-governing institutions if sexism and its manifestations are not taken into consideration at the time of establishing them. Political scientists call this “path dependency.” When an institution has been established, it follows the path upon which it has been founded. Afterwards, it is difficult to change the institution and its founding values and premises.

If discriminatory practices form the foundation of political institutions and power relations, it means that their path dependency strengthens gender inequality in all its functions and decision-making. Path dependency of political institutions has direct consequences for women, including Indigenous women. If Indigenous women and their interests are not part of the institutional design before and during the establishment of political institutions, it will be difficult to include them at a later date. As the history of nationalist struggles globally demonstrate, “later” tends never to arrive.

In the first part of the series, I wrote about the notion of self-determination and how the rights framework is too limited to understand Indigenous self-determination. For Indigenous peoples, self-determination is a central right and also a collective, foundational value. It is a broadly shared view about what a people or nation considers necessary for its wellbeing both at individual and collective levels.

At the heart of Indigenous self-determination is the norm of integrity. This integrity has two sides: collective and individual autonomy. Personal autonomy or individual self-determination includes bodily integrity and body sovereignty. Collective self-determination rests upon the integrity of the land. Both sides of self-determination must be taken into account in all activities advancing Indigenous self-determination. In this brief, I discuss Indigenous gender equality policies in Canada and Greenland.

**Discussion**

Research participants in the three study regions Canada, Greenland and Sápmi were asked questions such as whether Indigenous self-government efforts reflect the voices and views of Indigenous women, and whether Indigenous political institutions take into account the needs of women. They were also asked about their priorities in terms of Indigenous self-determination, most effective ways for Indigenous women to participate in advancing self-determination, and self-government in their own societies and communities. In short, whether Indigenous women should join the existing political structures, or whether there are alternative forms to advance society and self-governance for Indigenous women? While some Indigenous women called for a greater inclusion of women, a stronger argument was made for a politics of restructuring. This means placing Indigenous women at the center of nation-building by reclaiming women’s leadership roles, political power, and authority.

**Gender Equality Policies in Greenland**

Greenlandic women played an important role in working toward greater autonomy in Greenland in the 1970s, but were marginalized when Greenland Home Rule was established. Greenlandic women’s involvement in politics was restricted by several forms of structural and systemic discrimination that came with the Danish governance model. Passed in 2003, the first gender equality act centered on equal treatment of men and women in employment and in public services. This was done through policies of mainstreaming and affirmative action. The Act was replaced by new legislation in
November 2013. According to some Inuit Greenlandic women, an individualistic approach of the gender equality legislation in Greenland has significance only to women who belong to the urban well-educated elite. Yet it is the women in small settlements with stronger patriarchal gender patterns who would need gender equality legislation more. Gender equality legislation has had a limited effect on common thinking and attitudes about women’s bodily integrity and the right to be free from violence. High rates of violence against women in Greenland in spite of gender equality legislation points to the inadequacy and incapability of legislation alone to eradicate gendered violence. Gendered violence is only partially a gender equality issue. Violence against women is a problem that cannot be solved without a restructuring of relations.

Among Indigenous peoples, there is a common (but false) argument according to which gender inequality is not an issue today because of the existence of traditional gender egalitarianism in the past. Unlike Greenlanders, most Indigenous peoples are not in a position to consider whether and what kind of gender equality legislation they need to pass. Thanks to their extensive law-making authority as part of self-government, Greenlanders, have had to develop some kind of a solution for equal access to political participation of women and men. Because they have chosen the standard Western parliamentary system as their political organization, they have chosen the Western gender equality ideology and standard equality of opportunity model. They have not drafted legislation that reflects Inuit conceptions of gender and traditional gender egalitarianism.

Had the Greenlanders chosen a different type of a political order – like something more aligned with their traditional social and political organization – we may ask whether they would have the same dilemma with gender equality in those structures as they currently have? If the traditional Inuit social organization was without gender distinctions, how would that be developed into gender equality in Inuit terms and values? In other words, how would traditional Inuit gender equality look like in contemporary settings? Or perhaps better still, how and what kind of Greenlandic political institutions could be founded on traditional Inuit gender equality? These questions are important questions for all Indigenous peoples, not only Greenlanders. Notably, none of these questions were raised by the Greenlandic participants themselves.

In Greenland, political institutions and non-governmental organizations are considered traditionally masculine institutions. The focus has been on male traditional economic activities and self-determination as defined by men. Social issues are regarded as “women’s issues” and thus marginal to the agenda of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), the leading NGO in Greenland. Although somewhat changed compared to twenty years ago, when the focus was solely on fishing and hunting, social issues still receive much less attention within ICC.

### Indigenous Gender Equality in Canada

Indigenous women in Canada were among the first to raise the problem of gendered violence in the context of Indigenous self-government in the 1980s. This was the result of the heightened public debate on self-government combined with Indigenous women’s struggle against sex discrimination in the Indian Act. There was a broadly shared concern among Indigenous women that they would be marginalized in self-government and community development in the same way as they have been excluded from their communities by the Indian Act. Many asserted that patriarchal values had been internalized and naturalized by leadership and that they will be carried into self-governing institutions and practices. They were worried that as a result, women’s concerns and realities, especially gender violence, will be neglected.
Still today, Indigenous women’s concerns such as gender equality, social issues and accountable governing structures have not generally been part of Indigenous self-government agenda or institutions. According to one research participant, the established organizations frequently elect the “same old guys” who do not follow “the lead of what is going on in the communities, of what some of the priorities might be, including children and women’s issues.” Beyond lip service or creating women’s councils with no real impact, many were critical of limited progress in addressing the gendered structures, which typically place men in leadership positions and women in charge of “community” issues.

Indigenous women have made inroads to politics and are represented in political institutions more than before. However, they are still typically expected to take responsibility for certain issues that are not considered self-determination or sovereignty issues. “Women’s issues” include such as child care, elder care, social issues, education. As long as men can count on women looking after “social issues,” men simply do not need to concern themselves them. The mostly male leadership can focus on land rights and state relations because they can depend on the caretaking role of Indigenous women in their communities.

Accusing Indigenous women in particular for being “anti-Indian” when raising issues of gender discrimination has been a highly successful strategy of normalizing the division between sovereignty and gender and developing a gender silence in most areas of policy, law, and politics. It has also disempowered and further marginalized Indigenous women.

Postponing key concerns affecting a large segment of Indigenous peoples enables violence in its many forms to continue, and leaves relations of domination firmly in place. Not sexism inextricably embedded in colonialism will lead to reproducing the same hierarchies and oppression Indigenous self-determination is supposed to overthrow.

Many Indigenous women in Canada argue that it makes a big difference whether women are at the negotiation table or not. The absence of women translates into absence of women’s concerns and priorities on the political agendas and negotiation tables. The Sámi Parliaments demonstrate, however, that simply adding more women does not eliminate the hierarchy between “self-determination” issues and “social” issues. Nonetheless, sometimes creating women’s groups is the only way for Indigenous women to mobilize around an urgent issue that otherwise would not receive any attention from the formal leadership.

Indigenous women are not a homogenous group and thus it is not surprising there is no unanimity regarding the best or most appropriate ways of advancing and participating in self-determination. Some participants argued that the only way to create structural change is to join politics at all levels, including non-Indigenous organizations such as municipal and city councils. Many Indigenous women take leadership roles because, as some put it, they see the need to “come forward and stop the bus.” Some consider it possible to change the system from within. Others refuse to enter into formal politics and argue that Indigenous women should not waste their time, energies, and resources on a system that is faulty. Instead, they stress the on-going grassroots activism or argue that Indigenous women need to create alternatives, not participate in existing political structures.

When gender dynamics in politics are not considered, women are seen as deviation from the male norm. They are seen as in need of special measures. Women’s difficulties in participating in political institutions is explained by their individual characteristics, not uneven power relations, gender roles and stereotypes. Women are seen as the ones lacking a range of
capabilities: assertiveness, debating and negotiation skills, communication techniques, personal networks, as well as special arrangements such as childcare allowances and playrooms. Yet, when women are assertive, have the debating skills and run office with babes-in-arms, they are criticized and castigated as “bad mothers,” for example. By the majority of Indigenous leadership, motherhood is honoured but only in apolitical and limited terms.

Through introducing different priorities to the self-determination agenda, Indigenous women seek to transform self-government framework in order to address issues that have been neglected but which inherently are Indigenous governance issues. If Indigenous self-determination is to be about restructuring all relations of domination, it must begin from the perspective that gender matters. This means that we understand how governance and self-determination are gendered concepts by what is ignored and silenced. It also requires accepting the fact that once Indigenous self-determination is established, all will not be simply well. If there is a segment of a society whose interests are ignored in establishing political institutions, path dependency makes it very hard to change this.

**Recommendations**

1. Challenge the hierarchy between gender and self-determination and include elimination of gender violence an inseparable part of Indigenous self-determination framework, not something that can be addressed later.

2. Take gender equality issues as part of building self-governance institutions and structures from the start.

3. Deepen understanding of gender equality in Indigenous societies and recognize structural barriers in political institutions rather than explain problems as individual female shortcomings.

4. Publicly debate societal norms and shape new norms founded on a strong concept of self-determination consisting of both individual and collective levels, including a freedom from violence and coercion.

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1 I have considered Sámi gender equality policies of the Sámi Parliaments in a series published in Sámis Magazine (in Sámi language).