

Human Security in the Arctic: A New Perspective on Gender and Rights?

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Human Security in the Arctic: A New Dialogue?

In this paper, we explore how the concept of human security, which was developed primarily to assess and ameliorate dramatic challenges to life and livelihood in the 'Third World,' might be applied to an examination of aspects of political participation of women in the Nunavut, Canada. We start with the assumption that functioning and appropriate political systems and institutions are fundamental to human security; and, that legitimate and effective Indigenous representation and the creation of political institutions appropriate to Indigenous peoples' senses of identity, community and culture are essential to Indigenous individuals' and communities' well being.

First, we explore briefly the vocabulary of rights active in the Canadian North and hypothesize the ways in which human security might be a useful way of thinking through the rigid juxtaposition of individual *versus* collective rights that so often characterizes discussions of Indigenous women's rights. Subsequently, we present a specific case study of failed institutional reform designed to ensure the participation of Inuit women in formal politics in Nunavut. Throughout, we examine how the concept of human security can contribute to thinking about the issues of political participation and the appropriateness of political institutions.

Indigenous and/or human rights discourse is one of the primary political discourses generated by indigenous leaders engaged in activism and negotiations directed towards the Canadian state.¹ This political activism is based upon the idea that Indigenous peoples, as peoples colonized by settler states, have human rights – structured as "aboriginal rights" by colonizing states – that existed before the imposition of the colonial state, and continue to exist. In many cases, particularly in the

Americas where colonial governments and peoples became permanent, the refusal of the state to recognize Indigenous peoples' rights results in an unresolved relationship with the State, wherein Indigenous peoples remain colonized (*e.g.* dispossessed and in conditions of economic, political and social marginalization)². In general, human rights are understood as protecting an *individual's* fundamental human interests, such as protection of the home and bodily safety, and are believed to be universally applicable to all persons in all societies. Canadian political philosopher Will Kymlicka (1995) has been influential in broadening the conception of human rights to describe how Indigenous rights differ from the dominant understanding of individually held human rights developed by Western liberal political thinkers and in positing a place for collective rights in human rights discourse. His argument is based on the idea that Indigenous peoples require rights exceeding individual human rights, such as a collective right to the traditional lands that form the basis of continuing group livelihood and coherence or a right to meaningful political engagement, in order to ensure access to a secure base of Indigenous culture. Kymlicka argues that without such a firm societal basis, individual rights and the attending concepts of individual autonomy and freedom cannot be attained.

Yet, Kymlicka fails to move this discussion outside the colonial framework through his failure to engage with an Indigenous understanding of nationhood. Kymlicka ascribes the title of 'national minorities' to Indigenous peoples within the Canadian state. As the classification of minority requires there be an established authority (*i.e.* Canadian Federal Government), this designation represents another attempt to assimilate Indigenous peoples within the colonial structure by arguing Indigenous populations have no choices outside of this political standard³. This reality has furthered the discussions surrounding Indigenous rights as human rights.

If indigenous peoples have a collective right to maintain practices and institutions that differ from the dominant settler state, would their social and political institutions be exempted from basic human rights legislation and charters of rights? This issue becomes particularly prominent in terms of thinking about the rights of 'sub-groups' of vulnerable persons, often depicted as Indigenous women, within an Indigenous community and is often posed as an irreconcilable conflict between group, or Indigenous, rights and individual liberal rights.

Indigenous feminist scholars recognize the vulnerability of Indigenous women in particular communities and in particular situations, but ascribe disparities in the power accorded men and women in indigenous cultures to the influence of Western beliefs (Kafarowski 2002; McIvor 1999; Turpel-Lafond 1997). Thus, the protection and empowerment of women in Indigenous communities would not hinge upon the enforcement of Western individualist liberal rights specifically for women, but rather a restoration of the Indigenous decision-making processes and political institutions that have been undermined by constant colonial interference (Alfred 1999). It must be recognized that colonialism has rendered issues of human security for Indigenous women inextricably intertwined with the questions of self-determination and freedom that transcend gender lines. Colonialism has attacked the very basis of Indigenous cultural practices, which underpin the equality and freedom of Indigenous women *vis a vis* Indigenous men and non-Indigenous people. In the words of one Indigenous feminist, anti-colonial perspectives encompass:

...a theory and movement that wants to fight all forms of oppression, including racism and colonialism...we could see it as a struggle for unity among all oppressed men and women (Sunseri 2000: 144)

This approach, which articulates a necessity to interrogate broader social and political processes bent on the destruction and de-legitimization of Indigenous cultural and political practices, guides the following discussion of the implication for colonial political systems for human security in the Arctic, with respect to Indigenous women and peoples generally.

Western political theorists are now also working to think beyond the individual versus group rights discourse that characterizes much of political theory's approach to Indigenous claims. Bern and Dodds (2000: 169) propose that the individual rights versus group rights paradigm conceals that there may be:

a diversity of interests within a group that are not so much opposed to one another as they are to all aspects of the rich complexity of a shared way of life. As such,

it is not a case of an oppressed subgroup's interests against the interests of the wider group, but rather an array of partially overlapping but different interests that, together, form the full array of group interests.

Iverson, Patton and Sanders (2000: 11) propose that moving beyond this dichotomy requires abandoning the idea that rights are universal and unchanging and call for an understanding of the historicity of rights, human rights discourse, and their implementation mechanisms and institutions. However, they do not propose to abandon 'the language of rights completely...[but rather] the moderation of our desire to translate every claim into one that can be classified as an individual or group right... A postcolonial political theory needs to focus as much on these processes as it does on the language(s) of rights.'

Perhaps the concept of human security is one way of overcoming the group versus individual rights debate. As the United Nations Development Program (1994) noted, human security is an 'integrative' as opposed to 'defensive' concept. It is this integrative aspect, which recognizes the interconnected nature of all facets of life in achieving a sense of security, that could help us see beyond the perennial juxtaposition of Indigenous women's human rights versus the group rights of the peoples to which they belong. Human security was initially defined as freedom from danger, poverty and apprehension but both in theory and in practice today it encompasses political, economic, health and environmental concerns. In opposition to the language of rights, in which an individual's rights are either respected or not, human security invites us to think of the embodied and situational experience of feeling more or less 'secure' – a spectrum as opposed to absolute possession or dispossession. In the following section, we examine, through a case study of a reform proposed and voted upon in 1997 that was designed to increase women's political participation at the territorial level in Nunavut, some of the difficulties involved in rights-based discourses.

Addressing the Political Access of Inuit Women in Nunavut: A Case Study of the Gender Parity Proposal

On April 1, 1999, one-fifth of Canada's landmass became Nunavut, a new Arctic territory in which eighty-five percent of the population of 28,000 is Inuit.⁴ The gender parity proposal,⁵ discussed prior to the territory's official establishment, was an attempt to address the under-participation of Inuit women in formal politics by guaranteeing gender parity in the Nunavut Legis-

lative Assembly through an electoral system in which two representatives would be chosen: one man and one woman. To locate the debate, we will sketch out briefly the politics that led to the establishment of Nunavut, focusing specifically on how changes in leadership and power structures affected the political participation of women. Looking closely at the gender parity debate, which extended from the proposal's inception in 1994 to a public plebiscite in 1997, we will highlight how different political actors described the role of women in political institutions, in terms of traditional Inuit culture and western colonial political institutions. Finally, in light of the failure of the gender parity proposal, we will explore how the concept of human security might be a useful tool for developing other proposals related to the political participation of Indigenous women in decision-making.

The concept of a gender-equal legislature emerged from an awareness that traditional modes of Inuit gender relationships, leadership and the nature and structure of political power and organization have changed over time (Hicks 2003; Merritt 2003).⁶ Despite the leadership of several high-profile Inuit women, overall levels of participation of Inuit women in formal colonial political structures remained relatively low, particularly in Nunavut. The assertion that the Nunavut government could not adequately represent the interests of all Inuit if it consists almost entirely of males was one of the guiding principles behind the gender parity proposal. The idea of a gender-balanced legislature was discussed first in 1994 by the Nunavut Implementation Commission (NIC), which was mandated by the 1993 *Nunavut Act* to provide advice on the establishment of Nunavut. The majority of the 9-person commission came to see the idea developed by the NIC staff - an electoral system which would 'build' gender balance into the very structure of the legislative assembly through a voting system in which one man and one woman would be chosen from each electoral district - as a combination of practicality and innovation and a rational step towards overcoming a history of Inuit women's voicelessness and non-participation in territorial level politics (Hicks 2003; Merritt 2003, Harper 2003).

Prior to contact with Europeans and Euro-Canadian bureaucratic structures, the basis of Inuit identity was the extended family unit, which was usually led by the oldest male who took decisions 'informally, gently and...in consultation with members of his extended family' (Duffy 1988: 196). Ethnographic analyses of indigenous northerners' gender relations highlight that men and women were highly interdependent and that there was a mutual awareness and appreciation of this complementary relationship (Bodenhorn 1990; Dorais

1988; Guemple 1986; Reimer 1996). However, the Euro-Canadian traders, merchants, missionaries and government officials who controlled the North favoured the participation and leadership of Inuit men, a tradition which caused Inuit women to feel that their experiences and knowledges were not applicable to this new Western political process (Reimer 1996; Thomsen 1988). This was followed by the sedentarization of the formerly nomadic Inuit by the Canadian state in the 1960s, which caused the Inuit to interact more regularly with those outside their own clan or kinship groups and reinvent and reorganize their societal patterns, including new forms of political organization in the shape of settlement councils (Honigmann and Honigmann 1965; Vallee 1967). The 1970s marked the beginning of a campaign, led by Inuit politicians and largely in keeping with the policies of the Canadian state, to settle land claims and to create the Government of Nunavut, a process that greatly emphasized the right to exercise authority over land, a traditionally male domain of activity (Cassidy 1993; Damas 2002). The economic and political emphasis on natural resources and the centrality of the image of the hunter (Dybbroe 1988; Thomsen 1988) may have positioned masculine concerns at the center of Inuit nation-building.

Further, the emphasis on Inuit, and other Indigenous, women as 'givers of life, custodians of culture and language and caretakers of children' (RCAP 1996a: 64) positions domesticity at the center of Inuit womanhood, creating a situation in which the mobility of political office is problematic and women are distanced from the public sphere - the space of Western political decision-making and the space upon which political institutions in Nunavut are modeled. Nancy Karetak Lindell, a Member of Parliament for Nunavut, cited the criticism faced by female politicians for leaving their families behind when traveling as a disincentive for women to participate in formal territorial politics (*Nunatsiaq News*, 9 November 2001). Other reasons cited for women's low participation in elected politics include the difficulty of balancing family, career and community obligations and the challenge of gaining access to the funds and supportive networks required for political campaigns (Dewar 2003; Dickson 2003; Doherty 2003)⁷.

Prior to the public plebiscite on May 26, 1997, political leaders in favour of gender parity toured Nunavut's communities as part of the 'Yes' campaign and published articles and made radio appearances. Subsequently, a smaller 'No' campaign, championed by Man-itok Thompson, a prominent female politician who had served as a Member of the Legislative Assembly in the Government of the Northwest Territories, was established in opposition. However, all meetings about gen-

der parity had relatively low attendance and turnout for the final vote, in which gender parity was rejected by fifty-seven percent of those casting ballots, was only thirty-nine percent of all eligible voters (Dahl 1997). Regardless, the debate amongst the politically engaged was heated and clearly elucidated some of the major discourses active in conceptualizing gender relationships and women's political participation in Nunavut.

Arguments based on competing perspectives of traditional Inuit culture

Although the idea of gender parity in the Nunavut legislative assembly was not initially presented or discussed in relationship to Inuit tradition, the idea of traditional and inherent gender equality within Inuit society came to be used by both supporters and opponents of gender parity, who framed their arguments with competing views on the continuity between traditional gender relationships and those of the present-day. Supporters of gender parity argued that the proposal would restore a tradition of respect and equality that had been lost, whereas those against the proposal hearkened to traditional Inuit gender relationships as a firm foundation assuring mutual respect, which made the proposal itself superfluous. James Arreak, in a letter to the editor of *Nunatsiaq News*⁸, argued that 'women do not need to earn respect because they already have our respect' (1997). Acknowledging men and women differently was also seen to undermine an Inuit 'spirit', which is, in the words of Paul Arreak (1997), 'communally based and individualism is second to it.' As Paul Quassa (1997) argued, '[our ancestors] did things collectively in order to survive...I believe that this [idea of gender parity] will only make the Inuit think and act as if there are two distinctive groups rather than viewing us all as one...' Also, a relatively conservative interpretation of Christianity, which has in some ways been incorporated into Inuit 'tradition' across the North, was invoked by a vocal minority who, particularly over community radio, used religion as grounds for opposition to the gender parity proposal (Dahl 1997; Gombay 1997; Hicks and White 2000; Kango 2003⁹).

The conceptualization of women as the carriers of tradition, responsible for the care of the national family is central to Inuit nationalist discourse and echoes throughout understandings of Inuit womanhood. As carriers of knowledge about the communities and the home, supporters of gender parity argued that the presence of more women in formal politics would help the government deal with social problems, like those relating to health and education. One Igloolik woman said that social issues would have a higher priority if the Nunavut legislature had gender parity. She com-

mented that 'if we don't make a change, I don't see these types of problems going away...Nobody talks about them in the present government' (in Bourgeois 1997a). The importance of the family and women's role within it was also used as a reason to reject the proposal, based upon the notion that the absence of women in the home while participating in territorial politics could lead to a deepening of the social problems afflicting many communities in Nunavut. One elder in Pond Inlet voiced his concern about women being elected members of the legislative assembly, as children would be left at home. 'I see kids who are left alone at home...I think they're the ones committing suicide when they get older. What's going to happen to those kids when their mothers are at the capital?' (in Bourgeois, 1997b). Veronica Dewar (2003), currently president of the Inuit women's organization Pauktuutit, highlights the responsibilities of Inuit women as keepers of the house as another obstacle for women's participation in formal politics. She observes that community leaders of wildlife boards, hamlet councils and hunters and trappers organizations, who are mostly male, treat women who want to be involved as 'if you had no reason to be there when you should be at home taking care of your husband and family.'

Arguments based on competing perspectives of formal political structures

Those against the gender parity proposal argued from a position of belief in the ability of existing forms of representation and rights to ensure the fair treatment and equal participation of all citizens, an idea which feminist scholars argue has led to the suppression of difference from public discourse in the name of objectivity – a practice that reinforces the privileges of already dominant groups (Pateman 1998; Young 1998). Paul Quassa (1997) argued that 'each and every able Canadian elector has the right to run for office...we don't elect people because they are men or women, but because they have experience and have proven their ability to constituents.' In light of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, gender parity was seen to be superfluous as a legal requirement for and commitment to equality already existed.

Supporters of gender parity attempted to point to the reality of women's under-participation and the institutional barriers inherent to governance structures (Nunavut Implementation Commission 1995). Martha Flaherty (1994) saw Nunavut as a unique opportunity to reverse this trend:

We can avoid some of the problems with existing governments, one of the most significant problems being

the under participation of women...in the old days, Inuit survived in the harsh environment through cooperation, and now NIC is proposing to carry on this long-standing tradition of working together.

In attempting to incorporate an acknowledgement of gender difference into the structure of the legislative assembly, supporters of the proposal were challenging powerful notions about the nature of representation in the public sphere. The public sphere was, in many ways, constructed largely in contrast to the assumed particularity and subjectivity of power relations within the home (Phillips 1998). Feminist scholars argue that this contrast resulted in two concepts that powerfully characterize modern political thought: the public/private divide and the related notion of women's responsibility for the spheres of domesticity and reproduction and men's obligation to the public word of economic and political life (Okin 1998). This created a situation in which both women and women's issues are excluded from the public sphere of political life (Okin 1998; Pate-man 1989; Phillips 1998; Young 1998). While it is important to exercise caution in relating Western literature on the public/private divide to non-Western societies, much of the evidence outlined in this case study points to the influence of Euro-Canadian political ideas and institutions in shaping Nunavut's politics.

The gender parity proposal can be seen as a 'rights-based' approach, despite the fact it could be argued that the proposal's detailed implementation mechanisms and practicality overcomes the criticism frequently levelled at the use of rights-language, namely that rights are meaningless without the mechanisms that allow rights to be realized. Regardless, the proposal is based in the idea that women have a right to be involved in politics and seeks to implement this right by moving Inuit women into formal political institutions. The failure of the gender parity proposal essentially ended productive dialogue about how to involve more Inuit women in all types of political activity. In the end, it was an all or nothing game – the gender parity proposal was to be accepted or rejected in referendum, a right to participation as a way of overcoming low female participation in formal politics to be implemented or not. Perhaps the idea of human security, which calls attention to the particular historical, cultural and social circumstances of individuals and collectives in a certain place and forces us to think about the individual and collective embodied experience of security, is a more useful concept that can measure a spectrum of experience from insecure to secure and orient people towards practical, step-wise solutions rather than abstract argument and all-or-nothing politics.

Conclusion

In the introductory section of the *Interviewing Inuit Elders: Perspectives on Traditional Law*, the first words on page six state: "Inuit elders were not concerned with theory, but with practice." (Oosten et al, 6). Throughout this paper, we have attempted to take up that directive and to determine how human security may be a useful tool for thinking and, more importantly, for action, especially in relationship to issues of governance and Indigenous women's involvement in governance structures. We have argued throughout this paper that human security may be more conducive to achieving an integrated understanding of what it means to live well and live freely – a concept more open to participation and discussion than the theoretical and often 'all or nothing' discourse of rights. Further, thinking in terms of human security allows us to move beyond the prevalent and hindering juxtaposition of individual rights versus collective rights that has characterized so much of the debate about Indigenous women's within their collectives. The concept of human security acknowledges and must continue to acknowledge that individual and collective security are intertwined and that the security of Indigenous women is deeply engaged with the security of Indigenous peoples, both men and women.

Notes

1 This summary does not include indigenous political theories and practices that operate at the level of indigenous communities and peoples – such theories and practices vary from people to people and are difficult to make generalizations about. By contrast, strategies directed towards the Canadian state for achieving indigenous political goals are more homogenous in that key practices and discourses are set by the Canadian state itself and by politically savvy indigenous leaders.

2 In Canada, the State has pursued the extinguishment of aboriginal rights through treaties and through the so-called 'modern treaties' – land claims and self-government negotiations process.

3 See Alfred (1999) for an excellent discussion about Indigenous understandings of nationhood.

4 Prior to Nunavut's establishment, the Eastern Arctic was part of the Northwest Territories. Although Government of Nunavut is a public one, in which Inuit and non-Inuit alike can participate, the founding principle of Nunavut was that it was meant to be an Inuit homeland with governmental structures and political processes reflecting the values and interests of Inuit society. It is debatable the extent to which the Government of Nunavut is an 'Inuit' government and the effects of integrating 'Inuit values' into Euro-Canadian governance institutions.

5 See Wilson (2005) for further discussion of the gender parity proposal and debate.

6 Jack Hicks served as a staff member of the Nunavut Implementation Commission (NIC) and John Merritt was legal counsel to the NIC from December, 1993 to January, 1998.

7 At the time of interviews, Veronica Dewar was President of Pauktuutit, the Inuit Women's Organization, Jennifer Dickson was Executive Director of Pauktuutit, and Maureen Doherty was Executive Director of Qullit (Status of Women Council, Nunavut).

8 Articles and commentary in Nunatsiaq News, an English-Inuktitut weekly newspaper that has the largest circulation of any newspaper in Nunavut, were the primary texts analyzed for this paper and supplement the interviews Wilson conducted with politicians and policymakers in Nunavut

from July-December, 2003.

9 Natsiq Alainga-Kango served as Secretary of Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, the Inuit land claims organization, during the gender parity plebiscite.

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