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Experiences of Being a Young Female Sami Reindeer Herder

A Qualitative Study from the
Perspective of Mental Health and
Intersectionality

ABSTRACT *Objectives:* To explore experiences of what it means to be a young, female Sami reindeer herder in Sweden, a group occupying a unique position in Swedish Sami life, with special focus on intersectionality and exposure to risk factors regarding mental (ill) health.

Methods: A qualitative content analysis of semi-structured interviews with 13 strategically selected female reindeer herders (18–35 years old).

Results: The participants described a reindeer-herding lifestyle that they find joyful and vital, but is also conflictual and harsh. Gender-specific issues were raised, for example that they unfortunately and unnecessarily have a place other than the heart of reindeer herding reserved for them.

Conclusions: The results of this study suggest that the position of women reindeer herders is paradoxical. This position implies not only a

pride in Sami culture but also a risk of developing mental health problems which should be addressed in relation to gender, the reindeer-herding lifestyle and ethnicity.

KEYWORDS Sami, mental health, reindeer herder; female, gender, experiences, qualitative content analysis, social construction, social categories, intersectionality

Introduction

Since 1977, the Sami have been recognized as an indigenous people in Sweden. This means that they are recognized as an ethnic group with their own language and traditions who inhabited Sweden before the state was established. Sami land, known as Sápmi, extends across the north of Sweden, Norway, Finland and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. That portion of the Sami population who still herd reindeer in Sweden does so within 51 Sami villages (Swedish *samebyar*), extending from Idre in the south to Karesuando in the north. The number of Sami has not been conclusively established, but the most common figures suggest a total of 80,000, of whom 20,000 reside in Sweden (Sami Information Centre 2014). In the late nineteenth century, Sami culture was thought to be dying out and the Swedish state made provisions for the organization of reindeer-herding in order to preserve the culture (Ruong 1982). The Sami were viewed as a nomadic people who did not formally own any land or territory; however, the government decided that Sami people would have the right to fish, hunt and cultivate land for reindeer. This decision was based on what the Swedish state considered as culture-bearing in Sami culture. In this period, the Swedish state's knowledge and insight into Sami life was inadequate. One consequence of the decision was that reindeer husbandry was seen as mainly a nomadic, mountain Sami lifestyle (Lantto 2000). This did not reflect reality, as the Sami did not all live as nomadic mountain reindeer herders—many groups were forest, fishing and hunting Sami who pursued only small-scale reindeer herding. The legislation meant that only those Sami who could support themselves solely by reindeer herding could claim those rights. As a consequence, Sami were, and remain, divided into reindeer-herding and non-reindeer-herding groups. Those Sami for whom herding was not their main occupation did not receive minority rights, which affected their assimilation into the Swedish population (Sami Information Centre 2014). This legislation from the late nineteenth century, which clearly related “being Sami” to herding, has led to the present situation where reindeer husbandry is the most important symbol of Sami cultural heritage and indigenous ethnicity (Kjellström

2003). Recent legislation has reinforced the reindeer-herding-Sami lifestyle (Åhrén 2008), despite the fact that non-reindeer-herding Sami constitute 90–95 per cent of the current Sami population (Sami Information Centre 2014). The number of people for whom reindeer herding is a partial or main source of income is difficult to estimate, but figures mentioned suggest about 2,000 people over the age of 18, or 5–10 per cent of the Swedish Sami population. These reindeer herders have experienced difficulties and powerlessness as a result of governmental legislation, for example regarding predators dispersing and killing the herd, the exploitation of grazing lands and constant economic pressure (Kaiser, Ruong & Salander Renberg 2013).

Historically the Sami have experienced racism and lived under guardianship. Being Sami has been stigmatised and perceived as something from which to de-identify. It has been proposed that this process is part of the Sami's assimilation into the Swedish population. Today, ethnic discrimination of Sami in Sweden is reported to be widespread (Omma, Jacobsson & Petersen 2012), with many young Sami feeling that they have to affirm their identity and justify their right to exist (Omma, Holmgren & Jacobsson 2011). Reindeer herders describe not being understood by a Swedish society which has very limited knowledge of what their herding life means. Even their experience of treatment in the Swedish healthcare system testifies to a misapprehension and lack of understanding of their situation (Stoor 2012; Kaiser, Ruong & Salander Renberg 2013).

Women in reindeer herding was legally subordinated to men until 1971 (Amft 2000), where a woman who married a man with no reindeer husbandry right was deprived of her own individual reindeer-herding right. Men retained herding rights whether or not their partner had such rights. The loss of the right to herd reindeer for women meant that they often left the herding life (Ledman 2012). The 1950s and 1960s saw rationalization and motorization. Before this period, reindeer herding was an intense and nomadic occupation with small herds, and families taking care of their own reindeer. This changed to extensive herding, where families cooperated and managed reindeer in larger herds. In this period, the herders moved into permanent housing, which meant that many women remained in the home. Because of the increased financial difficulties of reindeer herding, women sought waged employment and higher formal education to secure their family's income. This rationalization and the introduction of motor vehicles into herding also increased the need for capital. Motorization could have helped women become more involved in herding; but instead it has had the opposite effect and separated women even more from it (Ledman 2005).

Reindeer-herding men and women often have different roles and re-

sponsibilities in the work with reindeer, and these roles and responsibilities dictate different levels of influence and opportunity. Although herding is viewed as a family affair, the men (in heterosexual relationships) usually perform tasks closer to the reindeer, while the women perform tasks that support and are closer to the family. To greater extent than men, women in reindeer herding constitute a kind of reserve labour force, moving outside their area of expected responsibilities and performing masculine-coded chores as necessary (Amft 2000).

Today, as a group, reindeer-herding women are better educated than the general rural and urban population in the same region (Kaiser 2011). While women are described as having one foot in each culture—Swedish and Sami reindeer-herding—men are mainly involved in the latter society (Kaiser, Ruong & Salander Renberg 2013).

Women are generally at higher risk of contracting mental health problems, particularly anxiety and depression, and the numbers suffering from mental illness in Sweden are increasing most amongst young women (*Folkhälsan i Sverige* 2013). Indigenous/circumpolar populations have a high risk of mental illness (Silviken & Kvernmo 2008; Bjerregaard *et al.* 2004; Gracey & King 2009; Marrone 2007), with suicide (considered and attempted) as one of the most significant characteristics and indicators of psychosocial health. Reindeer-herding women show a significantly higher incidence of suicidal thoughts and plans than other rural and urban women in Sweden (Kaiser & Salander Renberg 2012). Young reindeer-herding women therefore appear to be in a situation where the risk of suffering from mental illness is particularly significant.

The history and unique position of Sami reindeer herders in Sami culture and mainstream Swedish society is characterized by external threats and internal conflicts, both of which have been experienced as affecting mental health. External threats exist in the sense of public contestations against the existence of reindeer herders and reindeer herding, and legal processes against mining and energy companies claiming the land. Internal conflicts in the sense of conflicts regarding land-rights between Sami villages and the rights to manage reindeer herding and to what extent (decided within the Sami village) (Kaiser, Ruong & Salander Renberg 2013). At the same time, reindeer herders have a heritage with unique privileges and pride, indispensable to their identity. The aims of this study are to provide a deeper understanding of the situation of young, female reindeer herders, based on their own experiences from the perspective of (1) mental health and (2) intersectionality.

Methods

The study is explorative, using a semi-inductive design with a qualitative content analysis approach inspired by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). The aim of the selection of the study participants was to achieve a varied picture of the area in order to enhance credibility. There is no fixed definition of what constitutes a reindeer herder: reindeer herding can be full-time work outside with the reindeer or shorter periods of activity in herding work alongside paid work. The study's broad selection is intended to include more experiences and give a more accurate picture than could be achieved by concentrating on only one type of herding work. The main inclusion criterion was the informants' own identification of themselves as reindeer herders. Thirteen interviews were conducted with women aged 18 to 36 years who participated in reindeer-herding work in various forms and to differing extents. The women were from various Sami villages in the Swedish part of Sápmi. The geographic spread meant that people from both mountain and forest Sami villages were included, as were informants from northern, central and southern Sápmi. The informants had different types of education, ranging from secondary to higher education. Interviews were conducted in an environment where informants could feel it was safe to talk without being overheard, such as in the home. A Sami psychologist consultant conducted the interviews and sought informants for the study through various contact networks. All interviews were held in Swedish. No interpreter was needed as all interviewees maintained that they would not express themselves more nuanced or richer in Sami. A stringent approach was taken regarding the interview guide, with follow-up questions reappearing in a consistent manner in all the interviews.

Data Analysis

In the process of condensing and coding, the authors have striven to maintain a broad approach and include all meaningful text. This method can be described as semi-inductive. The analysis procedure was inspired by Graneheim and Lundmans' (2010) six steps in a qualitative approach to qualitative content analysis. The interviews comprised a total of 91,783 words. In the initial stage, the texts of all the interviews were read in order to gain a clear picture of the material. Open Code 4.0 was used to process the text. The first step was to condense the raw text into smaller units. To achieve equivalence between researchers, interviews were condensed by each researcher separately and the results were then compared. The text units comprised short sentences and keywords that were as close as possible to the raw text; interpretation was avoided as far as possible according to method practice. After condensation followed coding, based on text units and comparison

with the original draft. In order to maintain an understanding of the informants' context, all condensed text units were encoded. This created 1,435 codes. Codes that were not relevant within the framework of this study were excluded. The included codes were stratified into either general experiences of what it means to be a reindeer herder or content that seemed to be related to gender. The codes in the two parts were then abstracted and categorized. Subthemes were subsequently derived from the categories based on commonalities and differences. The analytical work was characterized by a circular process in which the codes were sorted according to the substantive (inductive) and theoretical (deductive) framework. The names of the themes and subthemes were formulated in close collaboration in the research group. The analytical process, with raw text, meaning unit, condensed meaning unit, code, category, subtheme and theme, is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 Examples of raw text, meaning units, condensed meaning units, codes, categories and themes

| Raw text | Condensed text unit | Code |
|---|---|--|
| A good woman is one who [...] to have time to take care of the kids in the field, then I'll come to the fence and have time to help out any time and throw a few calves and be on the midriff. And then she'll go home and cook and hang out the laundry and that's all. So it's not just, she'll have enough time to take care of the baby and everything and not complain (...) if you find someone like that, then it's, like, the best. | A good woman can be anywhere in the reindeer corral and around. Cook the food, do the laundry, take care of children and not complain. | A good RH-W can do anything A RH-W should not complain. |
| People get offended if you violate the myth that you can't be a woman in reindeer herding because it's too heavy. I can see why you can't do the same as men, it's all about the need for support. You have to think it's OK to join and teach the younger generation. It must be OK to make mistakes sometimes. | Others offended when you challenge the myth that RH is too heavy for women. Support training required and making mistakes is part of RH. | Provocative W, complicit RH. Myth RH too heavy for W. Support required for participation in the RH. Making mistakes part of the RH. |

Ethical Considerations

As the women in the interviews belong to a minority group, there is a high risk that they will be recognized from the interviews, despite these being anonymous. It is therefore important to pay particular attention to ethics in descriptions of their lives and their statements, meaning that we should not disclose more personal information than is absolutely necessary. Considerable care was exercised regarding the material communicated to the research group, and this material has been handled according to the Swedish Science Council regarding confidentiality and the Helsinki Declaration (WMA Declaration of Helsinki). The Sami population has a history of suffering under colonial and imperial power structures hence research often has negative associations (Ledman 2012), and there is a risk that the authors of this article may represent previously negative research. The authors therefore tried to reproduce the informants' statements in a respectful way.

| Category | Subtheme | Theme |
|---|--|---|
| What a RH-W should be like. | Many terms, conditions and expectations are different for men and women. | Women might also like to be at the heart of reindeer herding, but unfortunately another place is reserved for us. |
| Women can certainly work in RH. Solution is women's participation. | There are solutions; it does not have to be this way. | |

Results

The main themes and subthemes are presented in Table 2. Each subtheme is described below. The categories are integrated into the text and illustrated with quotations.

Table 2 (Main themes and subthemes)

| |
|---|
| Theme 1. Reindeer herding is my life, but it is also conflicting and hard/difficult/harsh. |
| Subtheme 1.1. External and internal threats and conflicts that affect mental health. |
| Subtheme 1.2. Reindeer-herding culture is so important that I live it in spite of sexism and racism. |
| Subtheme: 1.3. Mainstream society and the healthcare system do not understand my situation. |
| Theme 2. Women may also like to be at the heart of reindeer herding, but unfortunately another place is reserved for us. |
| Subtheme 2.1. Many terms, conditions and expectations are different for men and women. |
| Subtheme 2.2. As a child I learned to be a reindeer herder just like the guys, so I think I love being at the reindeer 'core' just like them. |
| Subtheme 2.3. There are solutions; it does not have to be this way. |

Theme 1. "Reindeer herding is my life, but it is conflicting and harsh"

The women interviewed described a situation in which several variables combine to produce a seemingly difficult life. The women tell of joy and things that make life good, but it is a remarkably difficult life situation where many have experience of mental illness. At the same time, Sami culture is vital to them, and giving up this lifestyle is not an option.

Subtheme 1.1. External and internal threats and conflicts that affect mental health

Certain aspects of being a reindeer herder are described by informants as very burdensome and contributing to mental illness. These include conflicts with the mining industry, wind power projects, land law, racism and problems with natural predators. These aspects are perceived as a threat to the future of reindeer herding, resulting in a fragile economy. This affects the reindeer herding industry every day and to such an extent that it is experienced as affecting the interviewees' mental health. Informants talk about how these conflicts together lead to a situation that causes depression, stress and psychological burnout. The factors mentioned above were voiced by informants as a major concern, both in everyday life and for the future.

I 6: when you're out in the woods and it's as hard as that, and you just feel that everything is completely black and that there are so many

problems ... You think like, that you'd welcome an accident. You don't want to do anything yourself, but it wouldn't matter if an accident occurred.

Further difficulties for the reindeer-herders' work situation concern conflicts in or between Sami villages. The informants describe situations where cooperation can be strained and there are conflicts. Ancestral and family ties are sometimes a further complicating factor in such disputes. The informants also describe conflicts between herding and non-reindeer-herding Sami regarding the rights the Swedish government designated uniquely to reindeer herders.

Subtheme 1.2. "The reindeer-herding culture is so important that I live it in spite of the sexism and racism"

Informants talk of experiences of racial abuse and how it has shaped them as people. They talk about their youth, when some of them felt ashamed of their heritage and identity as Sami, including descriptions of how a single individual had to answer for other Sami reindeer-herders' actions simply because they belonged to the same minority group. The informants describe how conceptions of Sami reindeer herders affect how they are viewed as individuals by others. A recurring concept is "Sami hater," which can easily be explained as Sami racism. This appears as a concern in the women's stories and is perceived as stressful and leading to poorer mental health. The informants' statements also testify to how this racism can be passed on down the generations.

I 4: I had a friend [...], she and I were really good friends, we hung out all the time and she was a Sami hater; she told me, "I hate all Sami, all of them except you and [name]." I asked how many Sami she knew. She didn't know anyone other than the two of us. Just because her parents and her grandfather and everyone further back had a lot of brawls in the past. It's a bit sad, I think, because I mean we're just people, we ... I cannot answer for what everyone else is doing, even if we belong to the same ethnic group.

Although the women experience many setbacks and difficulties, including racism, sexism and conflict, they state that they want to spend more time herding.

I 1: There're a lot of men who express their anger using sexual words and shout at women, for example, [...] Once I told a man off and then it was like ... I do not know. I have not talked to him since. I thought, that's enough! ... I just left the job I was doing branding calves and thought that's enough!

The same woman still longs to be closer to the reindeer-herding life and still identifies strongly with it. The informants' descriptions make it clear that no matter how much time is spent with the reindeer and what level of activity they have, herding remains a high priority and is something they must devote and adapt their lives to. They express a strong responsibility to pass on different aspects of the Sami cultural heritage, such as reindeer-herding work, their language, crafts, jojk, and meat-processing skills, to the next generation.

I 6: Cultural heritage is really important. It's a curse, you are born into it, you cannot choose it and you are in it, too; I definitely commit a lot of responsibility to it, I do. It's really important, it is, yes, it is really, really important. You can't escape from it.

There is pride in being a reindeer herder and this is seen as a unique position. At the same time, informants express a lack of freedom because they are always expected to represent their culture. The women state that sometimes they do not want to be noticed. Since being a reindeer herder and a Sami is often linked with conflict, the women perceived their responsibility to protect Sami culture as burdensome.

Subtheme: 1.3. "Mainstream society and the healthcare system do not understand my situation"

Informants describe experiences of relatives committing suicide and how they do not feel alienated by suicidal thoughts: they themselves had experiences of having to seek treatment for mental health problems, described as partly caused by factors related to reindeer herding. Contact with healthcare services was described negatively, as the life of a Sami reindeer herder was not understood by healthcare workers. The interviewees testify that knowledge about the reindeer-herding life is so limited among healthcare providers that Sami are reluctant to seek help. Ignorance means others see reindeer herding simply as a job, not grasping that it encompasses one's whole life and is essential to identity.

Theme 2. "Women might like to be at the heart of reindeer herding, but unfortunately another place is reserved for us"

Reindeer herding comprises many different tasks and the women interviewed talked about certain information being associated with the image of what is considered to be *real* reindeer-herding work. The *real* work is considered to be out with the reindeer in the mountains or forest, often on vehicles. This is understood as "the heart" of reindeer herding. The women described how there is a notion that this core is populated by men, and that a woman's place

is elsewhere. The informants described how there can be resistance to women who want to enter and be accepted at the core of reindeer herding. They explained how, as women, they are expected to take a more peripheral role, to support and perform chores for the reindeer-herding men.

Subtheme 2.1. Many terms, conditions and expectations are different for men and women

The informants described in their statements how they bear most of the responsibility for the household, finances and children. They stated that there is an expectation that they will assume this responsibility because they are women. The conditions surrounding family formation are different for women and men in reindeer herding. One woman described how she sees it as being taken for granted that she will take parental leave, as “[i]t is virtually impossible for a reindeer herder to take paternity leave.” This impedes participation in reindeer herding for those women who wish to participate more. Informants told how women are sometimes actively excluded from herding by obstructing their ownership of reindeer, being a member of the Sami community or participating in reindeer-herding work. The status of women is perceived to be different to that of men.

I 1: Women have always had a different position; I know many people my age who talk about women being useless at reindeer work and how women are such and such ...

Being a woman in reindeer herding is also described as being regarded by the men as “just a girl who can’t really do anything” rather than an individual. Some women expressed the idea that the more peripheral role *is* in fact the core of reindeer herding, as it is perceived as a culturally traditional position. Being at the heart of reindeer herding is described as having a high-status position of compared to those with more peripheral roles. Status is also described as being linked to a sense of one’s self-worth.

I 13: You don’t have quite the same status if you’re not sitting out in the mountains on a snowmobile or motorbike, so you’re not, well again maybe not so, valued so highly. The job you do is not valued as highly. You’re not involved. [...] it’s simply ignorance, they don’t value the work women do.

The women described how the more peripheral roles in reindeer herding, carried out by women who help and support, have lower status than the roles at the core. A number of informants repeatedly affirmed the importance of this peripheral work for the reindeer-herding way of life, and explained how women are the obvious providers of this work. This emphasizes indirectly

that the place of women in reindeer herding is not central. Informants further described how the peripheral work, where one is responsible for the finances and/or logistics, is mentally very exhausting. The situation often involves anxiety about the reindeer even if you yourself are at home, separated from the physical work with the animals. The women also described how they would instead occasionally prefer to be outdoors and very tired physically. The informants stated that no matter how they choose to participate, they think about the expectations of how reindeer-herding women should be and what they should do.

I 8: A good woman is one who [...] to have time to take care of the kids in the field; then she'll come to the fence and catch a few calves and participate in the reindeer work. Afterwards she'll cook and hang out the washing, and that's not enough—she has to take care of the baby and everything and not complain [...] if you find someone like that, then that's the best.

The stories describe these roles as natural and as something to be prepared for and learned from one's parents—this is how the labour is divided within a family. Being prepared to be alone at home when one's partner has to be away for long periods is felt to be good preparation for the psychological burden of living in a reindeer-herding family.

Another variable that the women talked about as different between men and women is partner choice and partnership. It is customary to move one's reindeer to the man's Sami village. Informants stated that once you have moved your reindeer to someone else's Sami village, you cannot expect to return the reindeer to the Sami village you grew up in. This is described as one of the thoughts that influence starting a relationship, because of what would happen if the relationship ended. It is described as a stress factor, being deprived of the opportunity to return to the life one grew up with.

Statements also show that partner choice can influence women's participation in herding, based on the acceptance of female participation in her partner's Sami village. One informant stated that in her own village, her participation was very active and supported in most aspects of the herding process. In contrast, her boyfriend's Sami village did not accept her activity, and this affected her daily life and mental health.

I 2: Umm yeah, I've actually felt very depressed for a while [...] I was living in such a relationship with a guy who worked in reindeer herding, but in a completely different place. And he was unable to see me as active as I actually am.

Subtheme 2.2. "As a child I learned to be a reindeer herder just like the guys, so I think I love being in the reindeer 'core' just like them"

The informants described experiences from childhood of being treated the same way as other reindeer-herding children regardless of gender. However, it seems that girls are perceived to reach a point where, even in such a neutral upbringing, they encounter resistance to their participation in reindeer herding under the same conditions as their male peers. The informants described how they encountered many comments and actions demonstrating that girls are not meant to be involved in all the tasks in herding.

I 8: I knew I could recognize the mark. It was my first time branding a live calf. I had been practising at home on orange peel and bark, and god knows what. I remember, he came over and he was a great man, like ... When he spoke everyone was quiet, because there was such respect for his voice. And then he screamed to my dad in Sami: "Have you given the knife to a girl? A girl cannot hold the knife, only guys are allowed to brand calves, what are you going on about? It's not right to let a girl hold a knife." That's how it was. And I remember, I was not so old then, and I remember that I was so sad because I had always been taught like that by my dad, no one had told me that there's a difference between me and the guys. [...] I didn't see anything because I was crying so much. So there, I was told for the first time that it wasn't, I wasn't doing what I was meant to do.

The interviews contain different kinds of stories about how the women experience the central and peripheral spheres. What these stories have in common is that regardless of whether or not the women long to be at the core, they still perceive the dividing line between the spheres and where they are expected to be placed, on the basis of gender.

Subtheme 2.3. "It doesn't have to be this way"

A recurring reason given in the interviews for why men and women in reindeer herding are not perceived to have the same opportunities seems to be rooted in physical strength. The stories tell us that there are many tasks that men are better able to perform than their female colleagues, because of muscle mass. One such task is rounding up the reindeer, usually performed on a snowmobile or motorbike. The motorisation of reindeer husbandry is considered by many informants to have segregated women from parts of the work. Several women stated that they want to carry out such tasks on the same terms as men. The study's informants who are engaged in rounding up argue that it is possible to participate in the work and that solutions are available, such as acquiring good equipment that is easier to manoeuvre. Others stated that it is all about dividing up the work differently, by

working intelligently and by anticipating situations that could be physically demanding.

Other informants believed that in reindeer-herding work it is not physical strength that determines women's participation but collaboration. One cannot be a reindeer herder alone—it depends on good partnerships with other herders. Others stated that the reason the division of labour is made on the basis of gender is because there are few female role models: you simply does what has always been done.

Discussion

Limitations

The psychologist consultant who conducted the interviews sought informants for the study through their network of contacts, which possibly meant that the stories were richer in personal information. On the other hand, there is a potential risk that informants may have been inhibited by personal ties to the interviewer. It is apparent that the participants spoke mainly about problems and difficulties, and little about the positive experiences, leading to a discussion mainly about experiences of problems. This was not expected, but might be a bias either in the participants' assumptions about the purpose of the study, or in the production of the interview guide. The interview guide was semi-structured, so it is reasonable to assume that the choice of words in the questions influenced the words in which the informants chose to describe their experiences. The interview guide questions were fairly specific and targeted the informants' own experiences. This may have meant that informants gave deeper and more direct answers than if the questions had been of a more general nature. Further, more open questions might have provided more varied responses and captured a wider range of aspects. It is also important to mention that it is not within the scope of this study to detect causal patterns or the prevalence of specific mental illnesses, but expressions of experiences and how they are understood by the Sami female reindeer herders.

Discussion of Results

The interviews have given us the opportunity to understand in greater depth the situation of young female reindeer herders. It is a position that is unique in the way it dissects several social categories. The results of our study suggest that the position of women living in this unique situation is paradoxical, in the sense not only having pride in Sami culture but also the risk of experiencing mental health problems. Previous studies have shown that women in similar situations to our respondents have a higher tendency to suicide than other rural and urban women in Sweden (Kaiser & Salander Renberg 2012).

The women in this study report living under stress, affected by various kinds of conflicts, expressed as leading to psychological burnout, depression and stress, a process studied in many contexts (Seidler *et al.* 2014), but not specifically among reindeer herders. These experiences have also been described by reindeer-herding men (Kaiser, Ruong & Salander Renberg 2013). The conflicts experienced by the women may be understood as a threat to their existence when their rights as reindeer-herding Sami are constantly questioned. The legacy of reindeer herding and the associated cultural heritage seems to be of such magnitude and so fundamental to them that abandoning herding to ease their psychological burden is not an option. The only option for the women is therefore to endure and cope. This position means that women endure, despite sexist taunts from within their own culture and racist attacks from mainstream Swedish society. Their cultural heritage is threatened from so many directions that women must simply learn to live with it, despite the negative effect on their health.

The informants also referred to a negative future in which the prospects for their own culture appear dim. This needs to be understood in the light of history, colonialism and the guardianship imposed on Sápmi by Swedish society (Kaiser 2011). As things stand today, the reindeer-herding existence is threatened because of the limited opportunities those involved in it have to influence their own situation in Swedish society. The situation is often perceived to be impossible. Suicidal ideation may therefore be understood as standing at an unbearable crossroads.

The above-mentioned problems can be added to gender-specific stress and frustration, which may also affect mental health. The informants described a gender-specific norm in which women are not expected to perform tasks that are coded as too masculine. Behaving according to expectations is socially rewarded. Challenging the construction of what is appropriate behaviour based on gender is, however, problematic. Informants who challenge the norm may have to endure punishment, verbal, social or structural. Thus, women strongly identify themselves as reindeer herders, but are not allowed to perform the same tasks as their male colleagues. This is another aspect that will affect perceived mental health. The heart of reindeer herding, those tasks that seem to be understood as the “real” work, appears to be constructed for men. Women play a peripheral role that seems to have less status and power. Meanwhile, there is apparently a norm that women should manage everything. Unlike men, women must be able to manage both the home and being out in the field with the reindeer.

The young reindeer-herding women tolerate a situation that is almost impossible to bear. This position can be understood as prioritizing those conflicts that are worth taking on. They cherish the reindeer-herding cul-

ture and this takes precedence over their desire for greater participation in herding work.

This unique position of reindeer-herding women has many intersects. One of these is age, which is a variable that the women interviewed did not see as significant and did not cite as a negative factor. Among reindeer-herding men, age is a factor in a competitive situation where younger men sometimes feel disadvantaged by older men (Kaiser 2011). However, one can imagine that the women recount situations where competitive positions in their case rather involve gender as a factor. For mental illness, age is also a factor in that young women are a particularly vulnerable target group.

Conclusion and Implications

The untenable situation in which reindeer-herding Sami women find themselves cannot continue. The suicidal feelings and experiences of anxiety and depression in the group that are revealed here are clear signs that the situation of reindeer-herding women should be reviewed to ensure that both community and mental health services are informed and adapted. We also recommend that future studies include gender-theory-informed methods and Action research in order to produce both knowledge and change.

Questioning the gender norms and discussing the prevailing status within reindeer-herding culture can lead to more freedom of action. The women repeatedly described their lives as hopeless, where they are bound to a specific role and situation. Discussion and questioning may lead to an understanding of the women and give them access to all areas of reindeer-herding work. Perhaps the view of what constitutes “real” reindeer-herding tasks will be challenged, which may in turn allow the physical and psychological burdens of the work to be shared. A reflection on gender-neutral socialization in the reindeer-herding culture could increase women’s interest and give them the confidence to allow herding work a chance and to show other women that all areas are open to them.

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