Violence in Sámi communities: From too frightened to touch, to openness

“The government was frightened to put violence in Sámi communities on the parliamentary agenda. This is misplaced care for the minority community,” believes Ingeborg Larssen, senior advisor to the Sámi Parliament of Norway.

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“When you are part of a vulnerable group and a minority, you constantly have to defend your very existence. When you don't have many fundamental rights, you don't raise the issue of violence,” says Ingeborg Larssen, senior advisor to the Sámi Parliament of Norway. (Photo: Tuva Svendsen)

In the Norwegian government's Action Plan *Freedom from Violence* (see fact box) there is, for the first time, a separate section on violence and abuse in Sámi communities. Ingeborg Larssen will present how this came about at the Council of Europe's study session on Roma and Traveller women and the right to freedom from violence, in Strasbourg 18 November.

“This has involved a lot of work over a long period of time – nationally, internationally and within the Sámi Parliament,” says Larssen.

“It was the United Nations’ call on the Norwegian government, combined with cooperation with several organisations and more openness in Sámi society, that led to the government meeting the Sámi Parliament's demand for a spotlight on violence in Sámi communities,” says Larssen.

“Gradual increase in openness about violence in the Sápmi region”

Domestic violence in Sámi communities has been fairly unexplored territory in Norway and the Nordic countries. At the same time, statistics from the SAMINOR study of living conditions show that Sámi women in particular report a higher incidence of physical, psychological and sexual violence than people with a non-Sámi background in the same geographical area.

“We have known too little about violence in Finnmark and the whole Sápmi region, from the south to the north. In order to develop a better knowledge base, we needed more research.”

The Sámi Parliament and the Ministry of Justice and Public Security therefore initiated a project on the experiences of employees in support services and the police, gained through their work on domestic violence in Sámi communities. This resulted in the report "Om du tør å spørre, tør folk å svare" (if you dare to ask, people dare to answer) carried out by the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies (NKVTS).

See also: Sami victims of violence do not seek help

“There has been a gradual increase in openness about violence in the Sápmi region.” One of the reasons for this was the 2007 Tysfjord case, which revealed a large number of abuse cases.”

Larssen explains how the residents of Tysfjord asked for help from the government.

“One of the fathers wrote a letter to the government asking for outside help to stop sexual abuse of children in Tysfjord municipality in Nordland. His son was one of the victims. Help never came.”

> “It was only when five UN committees called on Norway to include Sámi communities in its Action Plan that things started happening.”

International network as a door opener

In 2012, the Sámi Parliament joined the work of *The Commission on the Status of Women* (CSW), and began building a network internationally with other indigenous women, and nationally with several stakeholders concerned about the violence in the Sápmi region. They included the Crisis Centre Secretariat, the Women's Front, the Norwegian National Human Rights Institution (NIM) and Fokus – Forum for Women and Development.

“It was only by participating in CSW that we were able to see the bigger picture, and that gave us the international impetus to influence the situation at home,” says Larssen.

At a national level, politicians raised their concern about violence in Sámi communities several times, but this fell on deaf ears.

“We found ourselves in a difficult situation. Nationally, the government didn't dismiss it, but were frightened to address the subject. The attitude was: "We can certainly raise it but if we put a special focus on it, it will stigmatise the Sámi."

“Shouldn't we at least talk about it? Should we be so afraid of the stigma that we don't dare raise it? The worst thing we can do is *nothing*,” says Larssen.

The Sámi Parliament began contributing to international committees, which led to change.

“It was only when five UN committees called on Norway to include Sámi communities in its Action Plan that things started happening,” says Larssen.

From land rights to a life without violence

Larssen believes that in the past fifteen years there have also been changes within the Sámi community.

“We hadn’t come very far on the topic of equality. On top of that, violence is taboo, and daring to open up about it was a long process.”

“The thing is, we are used to talking about land rights, but suddenly we were talking about sexual rights and the right to a life without violence. It took some time getting used to,” she says.

More women in the Sámi Parliament and a greater sense of security within the Sámi community helped to set a new agenda.

“In the past, many Sámi felt that their backs were against the wall, and that they had to defend their community against the wider Norwegian society. Over the years, many Sámi have become more confident in their identity in Norwegian society, and dared to speak out about what’s not good within their own community,” says Larssen.

She believes it's important to start using good neutral words for sexuality and the body in the Sámi language.

“It has been difficult to use the Sámi words for the body and sexuality. Norwegian words are used instead, which distances them from their own body. Good neutral words exist, but they haven't been in use for a long time and they need to be revived,” Larssen believes.

> An important tool in the dialogue between indigenous people and the authorities is the right to consultation, which is now enshrined in Norwegian law.

“When you don't have many fundamental rights, you don't raise the issue of violence”

At the conference in Strasbourg, authorities, decision-makers and civil society from various European countries will meet to learn more about Roma and Traveller women's access to rights, and a life without violence. Rachel Eapen Paul, a former member of the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) and an expert on gender-based violence against women, believes that it is high time that issues surrounding Roma and Traveller women were addressed.

“Roma and Traveller women are one of the priorities under the EEA Grants. It is an important issue not just for Norway, but for the whole of Europe,” says Rachel Eapen Paul, a former member of GREVIO. (Photo: Norwegian Women's Lobby)

“Roma and Traveller women are one of the priorities under the EEA Grants. It is an important issue not just for Norway, but for the whole of Europe,” she says.

“In all European countries, Roma and Traveller women live marginalised lives. When it comes to women's rights, violence against women and domestic violence in marginalised groups, we know that this is a major challenge for women living in these groups,” says Eapen Paul.

Read: How can we protect displaced women and girls from abuse and violence?

"How can the work on preventing violence against the Sámi be transferred to Roma and Traveller women?"

“There are big differences between the Roma and the Sámi. National affiliation and the standard of living, and being a citizen of a welfare state, are the two main differences we’ve seen when meeting indigenous people from other parts of the world,” says Larssen.

According to Larssen, there are also similarities between the groups, meaning the work on preventing violence in the Sámi community in Norway may be relevant to the work with Roma women in Europe.

“When you are part of a vulnerable group and a minority, you constantly have to defend your very existence. When you don't have many fundamental rights, you don't raise the issue of violence,” says Larssen.

Eapen Paul agrees that there are clear parallels between Roma, Traveller women and Sámi, when it comes to marginalisation and oppression by society. This position makes it challenging, for example, to seek help from support services.

“To escape the violence, victims have to leave their families, which is such an integral part of the Roma community. The fact that they are an oppressed group living on the sidelines of society makes this loyalty to family and the group even more important. We‘ve also seen that in Sámi communities,” says Eapen Paul.

"Are there any measures from the initiative on violence in Sámi communities that are particularly relevant for Roma and Traveller women?"

“Adaptation to language and culture is essential. Support services need to have language and cultural expertise when dealing with women subjected to violence,” says Larssen.

Larssen believes it is about more than simply translating between languages. They need to understand the minority's history and what it’s like to be a minority up against the majority.

“Collaboration forums with others working on violence are also important, but this requires access to a professional environment.“

An important tool in the dialogue between indigenous people and the authorities is the right to consultation, which is now enshrined in Norwegian law.

“I wish the Roma people had a communication channel with the state, where they could say ‘we need to talk to you about this’. When the Roma community is ready to tackle challenges, the authorities also need to be ready,” says Larssen.

Eapen Paul will prepare a handbook with Zora Ivanova Popova, an international consultant from Bulgaria, to include the rights and needs of Roma women and Traveller women in EEA projects against gender-based violence and domestic violence.

“On the study trip to Strasbourg, we will gather input from the various EEA countries working on Roma and Traveller women. We will then create a learning tool for the support system – a handbook for how services can be adapted to the needs of Roma and Traveller women,” says Eapen Paul.