



Ageing, gender and transformation of the Arctic: an analysis from human rights perspective

In my dissertation, I explored how considerations of equality and social justice shed light on the challenges facing older people in the Arctic. I looked at the human rights, human securities and gender equality. I used two forms of data: first, published scientific literature and relevant policy reports; the second comprises a number of interviews in Finnish and Swedish Lapland. My particular interest was how the changes we see affect the wellbeing of the gendered older population in the region. The main research question for my study was how ageing and gender in the Nordic Arctic interact with equality and social justice.

The Arctic is undergoing a transformation. Two of the crucial developments we see are climate change and new livelihoods replacing traditional ones. The transformation of the Arctic affects the region's entire population – older people included – either directly or indirectly (AHDR-II 2014). While the transformation affects the entire population of the region, older men and women – those over 65 – are considered particularly vulnerable. The response to the threats posed by the changes under way in the Arctic have ramifications for gender inequality (Gunnarsson and Svensson 2017; Ingólfssdóttir 2016; Lahey et al. 2014; Prior et al. 2013; Kukarenko 2011). This, in a nutshell, became the impetus for this study on ageing, gender and the arctic. The first Arctic Human Development Report (2004) identifies children, women and older persons as the three most vulnerable groups in the region. This research focused on the Nordic Arctic and an-

alysed what positions older people have and what threats they faced because of climate change and the transformation of livelihoods.

Gender has not been considered an important issue in ageing research. Older people are often seen as being gender neutral (Ojala and Pietilä 2010; Keskitalo-Foley and Naskali 2016, 30). One trend in ageing research views gender as concerning women only (Arber and Ginn 1995; Calasanti and Slevin 2001; McMullin 1995). Feminist researchers Seija Keskitalo-Foley and Päivi Naskali (2016, 33) showed how gender is *easily connected only to women*. Although age and gender are intertwined, examining the two together proved to be a relatively recent line of inquiry. I do not adhere to any particular theory of ageing or gender but rather look at ageing and gender in terms of subjective age and at relevant social, cultural and material elements. In any event, age and gender must be analysed in a variety of contexts: social, cultural, local, geographical and historical (Keskitalo-Foley and Naskali 2016, 30; Irni 2010).

I emphasised on the importance of detecting knowledge (Harding 2004) in the lived experiences of the people in specific regional contexts. In my analyses, I identified different kinds of changes, challenges and threats affecting the human rights of older people that may result in inequality and insecurity. The general claim is that equality is rooted in the human rights framework. The rule-oriented approach asserts that everybody is equal in the eyes of the law. This was what is known as formal equal-

ity and it requires that women be treated in the same way as men (Fredman 2013, 223). It does not guarantee true social justice unless an environment provides equal opportunities to receive equal treatment under the law (Nousiainen et al. 2013, 44). Yet, a precise rule can be written into the law without looking into the real conditions under which individuals live. By contrast, the ethical dimension of the human rights approach urges fairness. The right to food, for example, means not only ensuring availability of food for all but also creating possibilities for individuals or communities to have access to food of their own preference.

The concepts of equality, social justice and gender equality are interrelated and reflect principles articulated in human rights. According to Anu Pyllkkänen (2009, 10), *[i]n the Nordic countries, substantive equality can mean just as much as the equality of outcome*. I combined social justice with equality to make a distinction between formal equality and substantive equality. Substantive equality is distinct as promoting a just society by challenging injustices and valuing diversity and connected to a fair distribution of resources and opportunities. Often, lack of access to suitable and affordable housing undermines the needs of the elderly when it comes to maintaining healthy living conditions (Wennberg 2017, 185).

I investigated the interrelation of the Arctic transformation and the lives of older people in the region with particular reference to gender equality and social justice. With temperatures in the Arctic rising and the sea ice melting, we see a range of problems emerging for older people, who are often particularly vulnerable to change. For example, both extreme cold and extreme heat increase the risk of death among vulnerable groups, of which older women are one. In the north, men face more accidental injuries when engaged in outdoor activities, such as reindeer herding. The impact of the climate change on older men and women is not the same: their lives have been and are being affected in different ways – physically, psycho-

logically, environmentally, culturally, socially and politically – with significant and serious implications for their human rights. In a salient case, this study brought up the situation of the Sami, the indigenous people of the Nordic Arctic, who relied on traditional economic activities such as reindeer herding, farming, fishing, hunting, trapping and gathering, and making handicrafts.

I studied whether the transformation of livelihoods caused by climate change and globalisation has caused socio-economic, cultural, environmental and infrastructural changes that impact older people in the Sami area. A central focus here was the right of older women in regard to equal rights and non-discrimination. As to human rights, I recommend that Finland, Norway and Sweden, which ratified the CEDAW Convention, should adopt the specific measures recommended by General Recommendation 27. For example, older women in rural areas often suffer from a severe lack of basic resources for subsistence, income security, access to healthcare and information on and enjoyment of their entitlements and rights. In doing so they must consider the hidden inequalities revealed in this research, the right to equality and non-discrimination of older women. Moreover, gender-positioning among older persons will continue to be affected unless effective policy measures are introduced and implemented.

The concept of human security is connected with the wellbeing of older Sámi in Finnish and Swedish Lapland. Arctic environment, food, economy and health are interconnected and they pose different challenges to older Sámi. I have done a case study from Lapland dealing with conceptions of an age-friendly environment in rural settings. I highlighted the features of an age-friendly environment, that was, one which older people prefer as a place to grow old in. In the opinion of my interviewees, the key elements of an age-friendly environment are good forest, land, fresh water, good connections with family, neighbours, and

the community, and an accommodating built environment. I emphasized on the needs and wishes of older people in northern Finland, pertaining to both men and women and linked to elements of human rights and human security. I suggested that the authorities could take more initiative in responding to ageing-related needs and preferences that will reduce social inequalities in the environments where older people live.

The changes occurring in the physical, social and infrastructural environments affect the unique features of the Arctic environment, making the region's older people feel insecure in many respects. Environment ensures interactions and networks among elderly people so that their involvement in local and cultural activities is guaranteed for their social-cultural and psychological wellbeing (Begum 2019; Eales et al. 2008). Feelings of insecurity and experiences of unfairness are more common among women, who are in many aspects vulnerable – being women, aged and, in some instances, members of a particular ethnic group, such as the Sámi. To cite one telling example, the structural settings of the Arctic region impose limitations on the availability of formal work. Here, it is women who suffer the most because of their position in society, which may mean lack of access to the formal job market. Many work at home for years, ending up with little or no pension. Another, related consequence is their lack of voice at different levels – in society as well as the family. In this state of affairs, for women living longer than men does not bring happiness. These disadvantages at times result in social injustices for women in their old age.

The lack of concrete realization of older people's rights in the contexts studied, it should be pointed out that the general welfare rules and regulations applicable to the Nordic Arctic offer somewhat better protection than elsewhere in the Arctic. Also promoting the wellbeing, health, functional capacity and independent living of the ageing pop-

ulation in the Nordic Arctic are specific pieces of national legislation: in Finland The Act on Supporting the Functional Capacity of the Older Population and on Social and Health Care Services for Older Persons (MSAH); in Sweden The Social Services Act and The Health and Medical Services Act (HSL); and in Norway, where primary care is organized at municipal level, the Municipal Health and Care Act of 2011, (NOMESCO Nordic 2017).

It has become clear that the changes we see in the Arctic will cause more inequality and injustice among the older population. Moreover, within that population, men and women, poor and marginalized people are affected in different ways. The principal contribution of the research is that it addresses a gap in our present knowledge. It provides relevant information on and insights into the positions of older people in the Nordic Arctic from a number of perspectives. The main argument I am making is that the Arctic transformation is causing more inequality and injustice among the older population in the Nordic Arctic.

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