

Briefing Note

Women of the Arctic: Bridging Policy, Research and Lived Experience

Malgorzata (Gosia) Smieszek, Tahnee Prior & Olivia Matthews

The Idea

On September 6th and 7th, 2018 the University of Helsinki hosted *Women of the Arctic: Bridging Policy, Research and Lived Experience*, a side event of the UArctic Congress 2018. Building on ongoing efforts to better understand gender in the Arctic, *Women of the Arctic* sought to bring conversations about women's and gender issues outside of research circles and to carve out a non-academic space for women and girls who work on or live in the Arctic. More specifically, its aim was to explore the roles and contributions of women to northern policy-making, research, exploration, art, activism, and daily life in a form of dialogue between invited guests and with active involvement of the audience.

The idea behind *Women of the Arctic* grew out of a conversation between Tahnee Prior, a Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation Scholar and PhD candidate at the University of Waterloo and Malgorzata (Gosia) Smieszek, a researcher at the Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, and their realization that, amidst a steadily growing number of Arctic venues, initiatives focusing specifically on Arctic women – the successes they achieve and the challenges they face – remain few and far between. Moreover, the equal representation of women on Arctic conference panels is still far from standard with women's perspectives often missing from debates, despite women's critical role in their communities, their societal and political engagement, and their high levels of expertise and credentials. *Women of the Arctic* sought to address this issue, fill this critical gap and reach beyond the academic sphere to illuminate the stories and perspectives of a broad range of women from Arctic and non-Arctic countries, both of Indigenous and non-Indigenous origin. Ultimately, the objective was and is to create an awareness

of, and promote a continued focus on, issues relating to northern women and non-Arctic women who engage with polar realities.

The Event

The event opened on September 6th at the evening reception of the UArctic Congress with the performance of a play, *Whale Song*. With a keen desire to bring together art and science as a part of a large-scale academic event, like the UArctic Congress, *Women of the Arctic* partnered with the Arctic Cycle, a New York-based arts organization that uses theatre to foster dialogue about global climate crisis, to create an empowering vision of the future, and to encourage people to take action. *Whale Song*, a one-woman 15-minute play written by Chantal Bilodeau, the Arctic Cycle's program director, tells the story of women's suffering and strength when faced with the adverse effects of climate change and gender-based violence; both issues are still rarely brought to the forefront of debates about the Arctic.

On September 7th, *Women of the Arctic* was opened with a speech by Finland's State Secretary and forthcoming Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers, Paula Lehtomäki, followed by a series of panels focusing on three major topics: northern women in leadership roles; women in Arctic science and exploration; and the role of arts in healing from systemic and gender-based violence in northern communities.

The first panel, "Northern Women at the Table: From Community to Business Leaders" drew on the experiences of women politicians, entrepreneurs, and civil society leaders to better understand their roles and examine how to prepare the next generation of women leaders. Among the speakers were Finland's former Minister of Gender and Ombudsperson for Minorities, Eva Biaudet, the speaker of the Sami Parliament of the Kola Peninsula and director of the Kola Saami Radio, Valentina Sovkina, and Kjersti Busch, a co-founder and CEO of SALT, a knowledge-based company from Lofoten, joined by Secretary Lehtomäki. Together, they discussed issues pertaining to gender inequality where even the Nordic countries, which often rank among the top in the world in this regard, did not reach yet equal representation in public offices. The speakers also explored the reasons behind the significantly low number of women entrepreneurs and investors, as well as disparities when it comes to raising and conditioning boys and girls in a manner that ultimately influences the life trajectories they choose. In addition to focusing on education and the responsibility of raising the next generation to take on equal work and caregiving roles, panelists spoke about the challenges of advancing work-life balance when caregiving and domestic duties often default to women – a commonality spanning from the northernmost communities to the highest-level political offices in the capitals. All panelists agreed that women bring distinct qualities to leadership, which is oftentimes more focused on communal benefits and shared advantages, rather than personal career advancement and development. In words of Kjersti Busch, being a leader is a privilege and as Valentina Sovkina noted women's softness is their strength, which should be cherished and valued.

Building on this momentum, the second panel on "Women in Arctic Science and Exploration" focused on traditional and Indigenous knowledge, as well as Western science, to explore how policy, education, international collaboration and mentoring can support women's scientific careers and

promote greater diversity in polar science. The speakers on the panel represented a great diversity of backgrounds and roles in Arctic science and education. Among them were Susan R. Eaton, the founder of Sedna Epic Expeditions which brings all-female snorkeling crews to the Arctic to document the effects of climate change, empower local and Indigenous communities, young girls and women in particular, and engage youth in experiential learning; Renuka Badhe, the Executive Secretary of the European Polar Board; Karen Barnes, the President and Vice-Chancellor of Yukon College, Canada; Gunn-Britt Retter, the head of the Arctic & Environment Unit of the Sami Council and the long-term representative of the Sami Council at the Arctic Council; Marina Kalinina, the Rector's Advisor for International Collaboration at the Northern Arctic Federal University (NArFU) in Russia; and Ylva Sjöberg, a permafrost researcher at the University of Stockholm and member of the Association of Polar Early Career Scientists (APECS). Together they spoke of the role and position of women in Arctic science and research and how there has been a visible shift in the management structures of many polar organizations over the last 20 years, with more women hired in these positions. However, this change is not pervasive; in many Arctic countries, a low number of colleges and universities are run by women who have advanced little in their roles over the past decades. Panelists also gave significant attention to the broader role of diversity in science and exploration, beyond gender equality. They stressed that diversity should be taken on as a full package beyond the gender binary to include the race, age, and sexual orientation of Arctic researchers, educators, and managers. "Women explore the planet differently than men," said Susan R. Eaton, "...the sense of place, where they are. Women seek to understand the place they are exploring through the people that live in that place." Yet, in order to become scientists and explorers, women must often face the expectations placed on them by others, like traditional roles, and by themselves, such as high or unrealistic expectations which can impede their development and cast doubt over their own potential. "It's very important to create opportunity for youth so they can make a choice. It is the opportunities they have that give them better choice," noted Marina Kalinina. The speakers agreed that collaboration among women fosters a sense of solidarity and common purpose which often prevails over competition. What is more, women role models and mentors can be immensely powerful for future generations. "We need to keep up with the younger ones. Rather than be protective, [we need to] guide them, be role models and help them get further than we ever got", concluded Gunn-Britt Retter.

The third and final panel on "Grappling with 'Uncomfortable' Conversations: From Past Traumas to Future Generations" examined some of the causes of, and solutions to, systemic and gender-based violence in northern communities and industries which disproportionately impact the lives of northern women and children. A special focus was given to the role that art can play in unpacking and healing individual and collective trauma. The speakers included Michelle Demmert, the Law and Policy Consultant of the Alaska Native Women's Resource Center and Chief Justice of the Central Council Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska; Sighthrudur Gudmundsdottir, Director of Kvennaathvarf, Iceland's first and only women's shelter; Liisa Holmberg, the Rector of the Sami Education Institute and Director of the International Sami Film Institute; and Katarzyna Pastuszek, the Artistic Director of Amareya Theatre who collaborated with Louise Fontain on "Nomadic Woman", which tells the story of her deportation as a child from Greenland to Denmark. Instead of solely breaking down the statistics on violence in Arctic communities, panelists shared tangible stories, real challenges and

successes from their experiences. Over the course of their panel, speakers were able to create a safe space for often-silenced conversations, sharing their experiences of intergenerational trauma in northern communities, at the hands of the state and local communities alike. Woven throughout their insights was a focus on art - film, theatre, and other forms of storytelling – as it is used in their daily work. “I can do nothing with what they did with us as children [referencing deportation and abuse],” Louise Fontain reflected, “but I can tell my story – my whole story – not about the shame, or about the loss of language. I can tell the whole story of who I am.” Katarzyna Pastuszek, Fontain’s collaborator, added, “when we [performed our theatre piece, “Nomadic Woman”, in] Greenland, the place where Louise was born...she spoke about her story...and most of the young generation knew nothing about this...that it took place for many years. [When we performed in Nuuk], we had a group of elderly women who sat with us after the performance and telling their stories of deportation. Which means that, depending on what audience or witness you get for this storytelling, (...) the tool brings different results.” Both Sightrudur Gudmundsdottir and Michelle Demmert reflected on how their work in service provision and the law engages with the arts to teach children to identify violence and to inspire legal change, respectively. Despite a focus on pain and shame, the panelists ultimately drew attention to the strength that comes from understanding. As Michelle Demmert poignantly noted, “It is so powerful for people to realize they are not the only one and that there is hope.”

The event came to an end with the closing session of the UArctic Congress, where former President of Finland, Tarja Halonen, an active spokesperson on issues of gender and girls’ and women’s rights, spoke about the essential role of gender equality in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. “Women are critical agents of change in their communities. Without women and girls, we can’t be successful.”

Moving Forward

To maintain a long-term focus on women in the Arctic, organizers partnered with creative communications collective [What Took You So Long](#) to document the event, as well as to interview some speakers and participants about their professional and personal stories. Collected materials will be hosted on a digital storytelling platform, at www.genderisnotplanb.com. The organizers are now exploring the possibility of hosting future events in various Arctic and non-Arctic locations, in collaboration with existing groups and networks interested in issues relating to women and gender in the Arctic.

The event was funded by NordForsk and supported by the University of the Arctic and the University of Helsinki.

For more information about “Women of the Arctic” please visit www.genderisnotplanb.com and follow along on Twitter and Instagram at [@PlanArctic](#).

Join Us

Do you live in, work on, or engage with the Arctic? Help us give a fuller picture of the #WomenoftheArctic! Send us your photo at info@genderisnotplanb.com and we will add it to the

mosaic of *Women of the Arctic* on our website. Please feel free to share it with your Arctic colleagues and collaborators.

