

Summary Report: *Gender Equality in the Arctic* conference

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(with support from IASC)

The Arctic has often been characterized as a masculine space. A recent article in the High North News contemplated the claim that Svalbard, a domain of masculinity by many accounts, was remarkably being led by a number of women both in government and industry (<http://www.highnorthnews.com/kvinnenesom-styrer-mannssamfunnet-i-nord/>). Although the masculine character of the Arctic is one that can be contested (parts of the region boast some of the most advanced equality legislation in the world), it nevertheless has been argued and demonstrated that the region is prevalent with male-dominated infrastructure and values (Ingólfssdóttir 2011) and where women continue to be subjected to diverse gendered threats (McGrath 1 September 2014).

Research in and about the Arctic has been heavily characterized by masculinist, universalized models of analysis, embedded with narrow assumptions about frontiers (construction of boundaries), who lives in and at these frontiers (barren wasteland with smattering of people here and there), who conquers them (male explorers/researchers/politicians), and why (classic geopolitics, rush for resources, etc). These assumptions, though heavily gendered, are rarely subjected to gender analysis and instead taken as truisms that continue to be perpetuated. Insofar as gender is connected to the Arctic, it is with regard to “good news stories” recognizing where advances have been made in general gender equality (usually represented in numbers of women advancing in the political sphere). More often than not however, gender analysis is missing altogether, a point that hit clearly home given the lack of gender focus at the *Arctic Circle* conference in Reykjavik that followed on the heels of the *Gender in the Arctic* conference (although a session on gender in the Arctic was arranged, largely at the last minute, for the purposes of highlighting the discussions at the *Gender Equality in the Arctic* conference).

A more nuanced, complex, picture of gender dynamics in the Arctic is missing. There is little question therefore that Arctic research must increase its commitment to taking seriously the application of gender perspectives, by critically questioning theoretical and empirical assumptions within the work, not least examining which actors claim power to determine political and social processes in the Arctic (from boundaries to resources to human communities), the results of these power dynamics, and who assists in perpetuating this power (including researchers and research groups themselves).

As such, the *Gender Equality in the Arctic* conference held from 30-31 October 2014 in Akureyri, Iceland was an important and timely beacon for Arctic research. The intention of the conference was, in the introductory words of the conference website, to: “broadly focus on the living condition of women and men throughout the Circumpolar North, addressing key issues such as access to and control over resources, representation in decision-making positions, political participation, regional development, human security, and material and cultural

well-being. The purpose is to promote extensive, policy-relevant dialogue on gender equality issues in terms of current realities and future challenges and in the context of climatic and environmental changes and economic and social development” (see: <http://www.arcticiceland.is/en/gender-equality-in-the-arctic>). Participants included Arctic community representatives, researchers, and policy makers. Participants reflected a diverse representation of Arctic spaces and communities, indigenous and non-indigenous, and from all eight Arctic states as well as the Faroe Islands.

The conference program was divided up into a series of plenary sessions (seven in total) bookended by opening and closing sessions, ensuring that all participants were given the time to speak and listen to each other (as opposed to designing the conference with parallel sessions where participants are forced to choose). Each session was composed of presenters and panelists who could provide initial comments before opening the floor to the room. This approach fostered a continuous and open dialogue between contributors.

The plenary sessions started with an overview of the state of affairs for gender equality in the Arctic, from indigenous and non-indigenous experiences, and then moved into examining the gender dimensions and impacts of political participation and decision-making, socio-economic development, the linkages between climate and environmental change and natural resource development, the (re)construction of gender in the Arctic with a focus on the role of masculinities, understanding human security in the Arctic, and migration, mobility and education.

Drawing on advances in gender and feminist theories we can integrate insights of intersectionality into Arctic research where exposed gendered power crosses ethnicity, race, class and sexuality, and the degrees to which silencing of gender and intersectional categories perpetuate specific notions of “global”, “Arctic”, “resource”, “technologies”, “economy”, “energy”, “diplomacy” and not least “security” and “geopolitics” (where human security may be relegated to a “social”, low politics question in relation to the security of the “big boys” pertaining to potential, militarized conflict). As was presented at the *Gender Equality in the Arctic* conference, this can be exemplified through the use and understanding of the concept of security, how it has been imagined and reimagined in the Arctic context, and what concepts like human security can potentially bring to our understanding of Arctic security. Human security has been invoked in ways that reflected a dominant, often masculinist (based on assumptions about the “universal man”) can be and has been problematic as a form of virtuous imperialism, where human security is a predetermined, neoliberal package delivered to identified vulnerable groups by elite powers. Feminist and gender security studies however have been useful in informing human security debates, opening the concept up as a site of intersectional engagement for local, national and international actors and practices. Human security in the Arctic necessitates an understanding of local practices, the role of institutions of patriarchy, ways of resisting oppression/colonialism/violence, and the relationship between community and uniqueness. A prioritization of a human security perspective in research can mitigate against the demands of a dominant geopolitics that attempts to direct attention away from the security of Arctic communities to potentially militarized concerns of the state. With closer examination it is clear that a marginalization of human security is difficult as the

security concerns of Arctic communities and peoples can impact the abilities and practices of states. A lack of gender analysis, on the other hand, has contributed to significant limitations in knowledge in Arctic research, and thus it is imperative that leading organizations like IASC commits to rectify this oversight.

We see this is even in the most recent calls for proposals for research projects, centres of excellence and workshop arrangements. We need to increase dialogue and awareness amongst research teams towards acknowledging the extent to which criteria of excellence (upon which research is supposed to be evaluated) are themselves often gendered (reflecting white, male privilege and dependence upon unpaid and marginalized gendered and racialized labour in the private sphere). A “field” or question regarding “gender perspectives” in the proposed research activity is not enough, where a standard approach in filling out these sections is to find a “gender researcher” (read: female researcher, regardless of her research focus), to just “write something for that” so that the requirement is met. This does not reflect a true commitment to gender research and analysis in the Arctic.

The *Gender Equality in the Arctic* conference, supported in part by IASC through delegate participation, should serve as an important benchmark for IASC activities. Such a benchmark demands not only token “tick the box” expectations for gender aware projects, but also an increased understanding and awareness within the IASC community of what “gender perspectives” means for research – both in terms of who designs the research agenda, who participates, and whose lives and experiences matter and why. By contributing to this initiative, IASC has implicitly if not explicitly committed itself to the further development of gender research, and should thus consider explicitly supporting and contributing to the goal of the conference laying “the foundation for a cooperation network of the various stakeholders researching, teaching and discussing and promoting gender equality in the Arctic.” Such support could be in the form of:

1. financial backing (perhaps earmarking of funds?) for future gender-focused conferences/activities,
2. IASC representation in the network of stakeholders,
3. Include as a requirement for any IASC funding/support how said activity will contribute to gender awareness (not least amongst participating researchers) within indigenous and/or non-indigenous Arctic communities, and/or within political/economic/social systems and institutions (local to global)

Thank you to IASC for providing support for participation to the *Gender Equality in the Arctic* Conference.

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Ingólfssdóttir, A. (2011). “Go North, Young Man” — Gendered discourses on

climate change and security in the Arctic." Nordia Geographical Publications **40**(4): 89-98.

McGrath, M. (1 September 2014). Endemic rape, sex trafficking and appalling levels of domestic violence: Why the US and Canadian Arctic is one of the world's most dangerous places to be a woman. Daily Mail Online.
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2737814/Why-US-Canadian-Arctic-one-worlds-dangerous-places-woman.html>.