Indigenous Women as Water Protectors, Men as Firefighters? Gender and Indigeneity in the Context of Climate Change in Sakha (Yakutia)

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Indigenous women as water protectors, men as firefighters – this paper contributes to the understanding of gender and indigeneity in the context of climate change by looking at what is underneath this established dichotomy. In the last decades, Sakha (Yakutia) in northeast Russia has literally gone through fire and water. The devastating floods and wildfires have caused not only economic and environmental losses but most importantly, social and cultural consequences. However, this paper does not intend to look at the vulnerability, adaptability, and resilience of Indigenous communities in the face of climate change and related disasters. Instead, it attempts to understand what has shaped the existing power relations, strengthened social inequalities and their gendered dynamics in this particular context. As an Indigenous feminist, I approach these issues from Sakha Indigenous paradigm. In Sakha-speaking rural communities, we still call ourselves people of woods and we refer to big water bodies as our grandmothers. This particular ontological viewpoint has been a methodological suggestion for my research and defined the specific way the analysis has been conducted. As a result, I claim that an entire shift in paradigm is needed in order to adequately address the climate change impacts such as wildfires. We should think not only about fighting wildfires but also about protecting forests, which will shift our perspective from what to fight to what to protect. In academic research, shifting the subject of study can raise novel research questions and opportunities for new critical analysis. Addressing the root causes of the wildfires will mean not only fighting its consequences but preventing this disaster. Finally, in the Indigenous feminist paradigms, protecting waters and forests means taking care of our human and other-than-human relations and, on a greater scale, our ways-of-being in this world.

Introduction

I come from the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), one of the northern- and easternmost regions of the Russian Federation. I grew up in a taiga area of central Sakha (Yakutia) where the river Lena, our *ebe* [Sa. 'grandmother'] carries her cold, silvery waters along sandy banks and hills covered with bushes, birches and pine trees. I have picked wild berries and mushrooms with my mother, observed my brother and father shooting grouses and wild ducks. We are *tya djono* [Sa. 'people of woods'], the way rural people are referred to in our native Sakha language, as opposed to *kuorat djono* [Sa. 'city people']. As most of our generation, me and my brother, cousins, and classmates are

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city people now. However, we still strongly identify ourselves as *people of woods*, as taiga is not only a source of subsistence, but most importantly, foundation of our cultural identity.

Global trends inform that women and their livelihoods are more affected by climate change than men. Since most studies on this issue are conducted in the Global South, there is a gap in knowledge and lack of understanding of how climate change impacts Indigenous women in the margins of the Global North. This gap is even more significant in the Russian North and especially in the context of wildfires. The wildfires problem is yet to be explored in-depth from different perspectives and mainstreamed in Russian academic discourse on climate change. Despite having serious negative impacts on human health and wellbeing, it still lacks critical reflection in social studies. In this connection, research done from Indigenous feminist paradigm can contribute to a better understanding of the issue.

The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) is the biggest federal subject of the Russian Federation. Covering 3 million square kilometers, it is sparsely populated by less than a million people, while almost one-third of them reside in the major urbanized area around the capital Yakutsk. The territory of Sakha (Yakutia), as with most of Russia's North, is being increasingly affected by global climate change trends. Climate-related changes cause permafrost thawing and subsequent landscape degradation, however, the most devastating consequences have been caused by wildfires. The wildfires in Sakha (Yakutia) destroy the taiga, which is highly important both in terms of food security, as well as social and emotional wellbeing.

In summer of 2021, 8.5 million hectares of taiga have burnt in Sakha (Yakutia). Combined with heat waves and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it put even greater pressure on the local communities. That summer, the increasing female participation in wildfire mitigation and management has been observed as women started to create themselves space in this highly masculine domain. Historically, being active members of the labor force, women around Soviet Russia have always been present in disaster prevention and mitigation field. However, in 2021, female participation and contribution became highly visible as they fought at the forefronts of wildfire management along with men both on professional and volunteer roles, while their stories were shared by female social media activists and journalists. As a result, active and articulate female voices have challenged the masculinized narratives around wildfires.

Thinking about wildfires from an Indigenous feminist paradigm, I center my focus *not on Indigenous women as subjects of study* but the *forests as a space* where important meanings, concepts and identities are being shaped influenced by gender and indigeneity. This paper does not intend to look at the vulnerability, adaptability, and resilience of Indigenous women and communities in the face of climate change and wildfires. Instead, focusing on forests, I aim to better understand the existing power relations, domination and inequality, and how they increase under social, economic, and environmental crisis caused by wildfires. In Sakha-speaking rural communities, we still call ourselves *people of woods*, and we refer to big water bodies as *our grandmothers*. This particular ontological viewpoint has been a methodological suggestion for my research and defined the specific way the analysis has been conducted.

As a result, I claim that a shift in paradigm is needed in order to adequately address the wildfires. We should think not only about *fighting wildfires* but also about *protecting forests*, which will shift our perspective from often-limited '*what to fight'* to more productive and critical '*what to protect'*. In academic research, shifting the subject of study will help raise novel research questions and

opportunities for new critical analysis. Addressing the root causes of this issue would mean not only fighting its consequences but preventing its development. Finally, in the Indigenous feminist paradigms, protecting waters and forests means taking care of our human and *other-than-human* relations and, on a greater scale, our *ways-of-being* in this world. Though women in Sakha (Yakutia) have demonstrated their potential for strong female leadership in wildfires mitigation and management, their roles should eventually stretch beyond caretaking positions and reach the highest levels of decision-making processes.

Grounding my epistemic location as Sakha Indigenous feminist

Studies made by feminist scholars on climate change come from two major paradigms: ecofeminist and Indigenous feminist. Though both paradigms have a lot in common, the relationship between them is not easy. The main critique of classical ecofeminism is its essentialism and support of women and nature, men and culture binaries, which justifies and maintains the female subordination (Ortner, 1974; Warren, 1998). Early Indigenous feminists are criticized for similar essentialist views but in another way – claiming higher status of Indigenous women in society before colonialism and their alleged power and authority (Anderson, 2016).

Indigenous feminist does not equal ecofeminist, or even broadly feminist. It is easier to think of Indigenous paradigms as feminist as indigeneity itself in general has been vocalized and strongly influenced by female scholars and their experiences (e.g. Smith, 1999), is derived from holistic, collective experiences and knowledges (Kuokkanen, 2000; Porsanger, 2004; Wilson, 2005), not exclusively female or male, but also not even exclusively human (Anderson, 2016; TallBear, 2019; Todd, 2014).

Indigenous feminist theories are multiple, there is no one Native feminist standpoint (Goeman & Denetdale, 2009) as there is no one single Indigenous paradigm. It would be naïve and narrow idea to think that all Indigenous peoples share the same worldview, similar epistemologies and ontologies. However, there are close relationships and values shared among them that makes it possible to see them as alternatives to 'Western', including most ecofeminist theories which are located in white, 'Western' paradigms.

In the current body of critical reflections both on ecofeminism and Indigenous feminism, several frictions can be found. Ecofeminism is being criticized by some Indigenous feminists who argue that 'Western' feminists invoke Aboriginal cultural beliefs and histories (Wilson, 2005), some warn about appropriation of Indigenous concepts when developing ecofeminist theories (Nixon, 2015). Some call for ethical and respectful inclusion of Indigenous women voices to greater feminist movements (Kwaymullina, 2017), while others only see the possibility of partial connection between them (Sempertegui, 2019).

Unified views of 'Western' ecofeminism and Indigenous feminism can harm the way Indigenous women are perceived. The application of Western gender theory and policy to Indigenous has tended to reduce women and girls' experiences to the categories of 'victim' and 'other' (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010). Similarly, in many Indigenous contexts, the predominant discourse of liberal feminism tends to focus exclusively on gender discrimination and gender equality. The problem is the lack of recognition of Indigenous women's articulations and conceptualizations of feminism that do not focus solely on gender discrimination or gender equality (Flowers, 2015; Knobblock & Kuokkanen, 2015). Such an approach towards Indigenous women was demonstrated in the recent

Gender Equality in the Arctic Report, where, unfortunately, indigeneity is mentioned only in the context of violence and reconciliation (2021).

While there is a clear tendency of reducing indigeneity and gender in climate change to the concept of vulnerability, Indigenous feminisms debate this dominant discourse as they come out of a long history of activism to address different types of oppression in their communities (Anderson, 2020). Importantly, Indigenous feminism has been 'instrumental' in the resistance to resource extraction (Yazzie & Baldy, 2018) especially in water protection movements.

This approach also acknowledges the particular positioning of Indigenous women as researchers who 'stand with' their communities in an ethic of 'staying in relation' (TallBear, 2014). Indigenous research and activism are understood as a whole, as a 'scientific service to one's people' (Vinokurova, 2017), where a person becomes a 'transformative healer, who resists dominant research discourses in order to develop processes of social justice and healing in the community' (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010). This 'epistemic disobedience' (Mignolo, 2009) leads to transnational Indigenous feminisms that negate powerlessness and center on relationships beyond dominating paradigms (Aikau et al., 2015; Evans, 1994). The interconnectedness between Indigenous women's bodies and the lands that women caretake becomes central, thus, responsibility to lands and waters is a key part of the collective and radical relationality work of Indigenous feminists (Yazzie & Baldy, 2018).

In developing my research, I am largely inspired by Indigenous feminist theories of relationality (e.g. Anderson, 2016; TallBear, 2019; Todd, 2014) and guided by Indigenous methodologies principles as defined by Indigenous scholars (e.g. Kovach, 2010; Kuokkanen, 2000; Porsanger, 2004; Wilson, 2000). The Indigenous feminist paradigm shaped by Sakha perspective will contribute to better understanding of gender and indigeneity in the context of climate change. Thinking about how feminist theorizing, concepts, discourses, and understandings can be developed to better accommodate Indigenous feminist perspectives and understandings (Sinevaara-Niskanen, 2010), I would like to place Indigenous feminism from a Sakha perspective within the mainstream and as part of Indigenous feminisms rooted in other Indigenous lands and minds throughout the world.

Localizing the problem in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), Russia

Climate change is a major challenge to Arctic and other Indigenous peoples, but often its impacts are largely understood in policy and research frameworks and separately from issues of health, poverty, education, cultural vitality, equity, and justice (Huntington et al., 2019). Climate change threatens global sustainable development while very often its massive burden is carried by the poorest and most vulnerable. Its impacts are felt by everyone, but not equally: women and men experience the changing climate differently.

According to the UN Gender, Climate and Security report (2020), 'a gender-blind' approach to addressing climate-related security risks – or a 'climate-blind' approach to women, peace and security programming – can exacerbate the vulnerabilities of groups exposed to climate change, thus deepening already existing inequalities and potentially aggravating environmental and security threats. Furthermore, Indigenous women often face multilayered risks as they are discriminated against as environmental activists, as women and as part of an ethnic minority group.

Up until recently, the topic of gender did not figure prominently in Arctic research (Hoogensen, 2017; Vladimirova & Habeck, 2018). Moreover, most studies focus on women and female experiences, while those of men's and outside gender binaries are still understudied (Oddsdóttir & Ágústsson, 2021). In Sakha (Yakutia), the leading female scholars of the Institute for Humanities and Indigenous Issues have been the most active writers on gender and women. They have made a significant contribution to understanding the role and situation of women in Sakha (Yakutia), mostly focusing on female political participation and role of Indigenous women in society (Vinokurova et al., 2004). Unlike systemic research on some women issues, sporadic research has been done on Indigenous men and masculinities. The most recent studies are ethnographical accounts which look at how current Sakha masculinities are being shaped (Yakutia) (e.g. Bragina, 2021; Tarasova, 2021; Ventsel, 2018).

Interestingly, unlike research on Indigenous women in Canada in regards to their land-based activities and climate change, no similar study has been done on female experiences in Sakha (Yakutia). These are gaps in knowledge that should be addressed. In the regional context, studies on the Russian Arctic and especially Sakha (Yakutia) lack social and cultural research done from Indigenous paradigms, as most works are done in a framework of Western sociology and ethnography. Thus, despite a body of knowledge produced on gender aspects of various social phenomena in Sakha (Yakutia), there is no well-established tradition of critical gender studies, especially from an Indigenous feminist paradigm.

Due to climate change, the Arctic has been warming at more than twice the global rate over the past 50 years, causing drastic changes in its environment (AMAP, 2019). While indigeneity in general received relatively more attention in climate change scholarship in the Arctic, its gendered aspects remain marginal in the studies of climate change adaptation, resilience, and vulnerability (Bunce & Ford, 2015). Previous contribution to the issue has demonstrated that climate change-related disasters strengthen patriarchal structures in Indigenous societies (Vinokurova, 2017). Thus, climate change should be seen as a disruption of, first and foremost, relations with our human and other relatives (Burnasheva, 2020).

Traditional land-based activities and wildfires: looking into (stereo)typical gendered activities in forests

Research done in the Northwest Territories (NWT), Canada on experiences of wildfire season demonstrates consequences of 'summer of smoke' for health and well-being. For instance, people reported not only physical consequences such as limited activity and interruption of traditional summer activities, such as berry harvesting and fishing, but also emotional, such as fear, stress, uncertainty and isolation. For some, the only way to cope was by leaving their communities, so wildfires produced literal separation from the land (Dodd et al., 2017). The same was observed in Sakha (Yakutia) during the summer wildfires in 2021, when some people reported leaving to other Russian regions until fires are over, or even considering moving to other regions of Russia. People shared disappointment and sadness about the non-ability to enjoy the short northern summer.

Across the Arctic, environmental and climate change is altering and disrupting hunting, foraging, fishing, and trapping among Indigenous communities (Beaumier & Ford, 2010; Ford et al., 2016; Cunsolo et al., 2012). While local food production alone cannot solve all the food-related issues northerners are facing today (Herrmann et al., 2021), traditional subsistence systems and food

remain a crucial part of ensuring 'food resilience' (Tendall et al., 2015) in the rural communities. The wildfires have direct negative impacts on everyone regardless of gender. However, as recent wildfires in Sakha (Yakutia) demonstrated, they can impact land-based activities associated with men and women differently. I use the examples of berry-picking and hunting on purpose because it has been an example in other case studies done among Inuit in Canada (Ford et al., 2016). It is an instructive and fruitful analytical tool to use analogies from different parts of the North to see similarities and contrasts.

Though men also go berry picking and some women hunt, berry picking is a female-dominated land-based activity in contrast to hunting (also fishing) which are predominantly male. In central Sakha (Yakutia) which is a focus of my research, berry picking and hunting take place in taiga. These activities provide important food – berries and game, which are essential part of traditional diet and food security. They are both important types of socialization, also important in terms of mental and emotional well-being (Ford et al., 2016). Apart from being both subsistence and recreation source, hunting is imbued with symbolic meanings and status. Unsurprisingly, hunting is directly linked to notions of masculinity and ethnic identity for young men.

For women, berry picking does not have such meanings. As Ford et al. (2016) note, berry picking in Inuit communities does not conflict with work and childcare duties, unlike hunting. Similarly, in rural Sakha communities, women often combine berry picking and childcare, so many children are exposed to this activity since the early age, unlike hunting, where boys are introduced only after they are able to take care of themselves. Again, Ford et al. (2016) note that unlike hunting, berry picking does not necessarily require access to transport, though it is changing now due to changing rain patterns and plant communities.

Notably, rural women often sell berries to have more income. Children of school age, especially girls, are also involved in this labor. Unlike berries, game is usually not sold. Selling game is a very new phenomenon in urban settings as traditionally it was shared with elders and relatives. Also, game is no longer a substantial part of traditional diets even in rural areas, it is not everyday food unlike berries, yet it requires more time and money spent on the process. Berry picking does not require any investments unlike hunting but it is much more productive in terms of revenue. It also has less of a recreational character unlike hunting.

Identifying discrepancies and inequality

While in most cases berry picking does not require from women anything but free time, a bucket and walking (Ford et al., 2016), men hunting requires expenses related to buying, building, and maintaining seasonal hunting gear, hunting hut, transport, gasoline, rifles, dogs, and food, and importantly, vacation time. There are fundamental differences between these land-based activities which demonstrate fundamental gender inequality. I do not intend to diminish hunting as inherently discriminative, however, in most cases, there is a clear tendency of uneven distribution of resources and contribution to family food security. There is a whole industry around men's outdoor and hunting clothing and equipment, while women who also spend much time outdoors, have more limited opportunities.

Both hunting and berry picking are necessary as symbols of stability, seasonal changes and cultural identity, it is at once an 'important traditional food, subsistence economy and social fabric' (Ksenofontov et al., 2017). Both of them are now affected by climate change: women and men

express the same concerns and anxiety regarding the decreasing availability of wild game and berries. Climate change means not only disruption of traditional food systems but is also a threat to social and emotional wellbeing. It also involves more time, efforts and costs as decreased opportunities have caused longer trips both for hunting and berry picking. Especially, it affected women who used to cover shorter distances but now they have to expand their areas, which involves more walking and organizing, which means more mental and physical labor (also in Ford et al., 2016).

Both berry-picking and hunting are demonstrative examples for understanding different types of traditional gendered land-based activities in the context of cultural, social, economic, and environmental changes happening in the region. They are activities that are at the same time subsistence, recreation, non-paid labor and unofficial income. During the wildfires in summer 2021, there were attempts by the local government to officially regulate land-based activities. It was strongly recommended to avoid the forests, also due to outbreak of pest infestations and subsequent treatment with pesticides. Since the wildfires have lasted throughout the summer months, they affected mainly female activities, hunting was not affected as much as berry-picking since its season is in early fall and late spring, when most wildfires have not started yet or are managed and naturally extinguished due to fall rains and decreasing temperatures.

Although women have their space in the taiga, the forests remain almost exclusively a male realm where men exercise their heteronormative masculinity and support patriarchal values. Shaped largely by male-dominated hunting, forests are constructed as a conservative, masculine, heterosexual space. It is coupled with a limited, unsustainable, excessively centralized approach of Russian forestry management (Sokolov, 2020; FNO, 2012). Thus, the forests in Sakha (Yakutia) suffer from 'masculinization' and can enormously benefit from 'feminization'.

Feminizing the masculinized: from fighting fires to protecting forests. Why adding women to firefighter brigades is not enough?

Encouraged by Socialist ideology and Soviet growth strategy (Ofer, 1985), women have had high labor force participation even in areas traditionally perceived as masculine, such as emergency preparedness and management. Although no data is available on gender composition of numerous state agencies responsible for management of wildfires, women have always been present in its bureaucratic structures. For example, in central agencies for management and mitigation of emergency situations in Russia's federal districts every third officer is a woman (Kashina, 2021). Although the Ministry for Emergency is often associated with natural disasters, the wildfires are in fact an area of responsibility of several state agencies with complicated hierarchies and structures of their own. As experts suggest, the Russian fire management system is in deep crisis (Sokolov et al., 2020).

The summer wildfire season of 2021 in Sakha (Yakutia) was different from previous ones. It was so far the most devastating as it caused human loss among volunteers and dozens of burnt houses in a rural settlement of Bes Kuel. From the very beginning women have been continuously active in social media sharing pictures and videos of wildfires threatening the rural communities. As the situation got worse, female social media influencers started social media campaigns locally and internationally to raise awareness. They led several campaigns for crowdfunding to help the

firefighters with food supplies and inventory (Iakutiia sgoraet zazhivo: blogery zapustili fleshmob za spasenie respubliki ot pozharov, 2021).

Active female leadership helped establish the work of the Volunteer center in Yakutsk. While its major activities were coordinated by women, only men were recruited to firefighter's roles due to high risks and difficult working conditions. However, women were most active and willing to join the firefighter brigades. At the beginning, they were not accepted to the field, however, the most determined female volunteers convinced the recruiters and were assigned to the brigades as cooks. However, as female stories show, their responsibilities stretched beyond cooking as they took care of men cheering them up, guiding them through and providing support when needed (Efremova, 2021; Toytonova, 2021). Thus, female caretaking responsibilities at firefighter brigades should not be diminished to mere service providing roles, as they are proved to be the bedrock of this system.

In remote rural areas, far away from more centralized organization and supply, women performed work typically assigned to and considered as male from the very beginning. In some villages, women formed female firefighter brigades which raised discussion in social media, namely, the most popular news outlet. Some criticized the state agencies and local government, some compared them with Soviet women fighting the fascism during the Second World War, some expressed solidarity and pointed out to sense of belonging and unity among people (Zhenshchiny vyshli na bor'bu s lesnymi pozharami v Iakutii, 2021; Foto s zhenshchinami, tushivshimi pozhary v Ytyk-Kuele vyzvalo vozmushchenie v sotsetiakh, 2021). Unfortunately, there is no data available on the scale of female participation in professional and volunteer firefighter brigades. However, much more than previously, it has been visible in media discourse. The voices of female activists, firefighters and journalists made visible what was previously hidden behind the bureaucratic reports, and it made wildfires discourse more transparent and put a human face onto it.

Similar to a feminist claim 'adding women and solar panels is not enough' made by Bell et al. (2020) in regards to energy systems, adding women to a firefighter brigade is not enough. Placing the wildfires within larger system and structures of power would help us understand how power works more broadly in the context of climate change and related disasters. In this sense, if we approach the dynamic of power relations, domination and vulnerabilities, we will be able to see the wider picture. The unsustainable wildfire mitigation and forest management systems require fundamental restructuring of institutions and sharing power. However, it is not a mere restructuration, but an entire shift in paradigm is needed in order to challenge the established unsustainable system of behaviors and norms, as well as knowledge and laws around wildfires and forests.

Adding more women to firefighter brigades is not enough because it does not challenge the unsustainable system and established power relations. We have to ensure female participation on all levels – starting from firefighter brigades on land to the political offices on the highest level. Despite active female participation, their further involvement in larger decision-making processes remains uncertain. Following the general Soviet trends, women in Sakha (Yakutia) have been actively participating in labor force and have acquired leading positions. However, throughout all the levels there is still a gender asymmetry and disproportionate distribution of power (Ivanova, 2016; Egorova et al., 2017; Evseev, 2016; Petrov & Lukina, 2020).

Shifting the paradigm

Unlike wildfires, water narratives are feminized narratives. In Indigenous feminist paradigms, not only water is 'other-than-human' and 'more-than-human' relative (Anderson et al., 2013; Stevenson, 2018; TallBear, 2019; Todd, 2017; Yazzie & Baldy, 2018), but it is literally perceived as grandmother, particularly in the Sakha paradigm (Burnasheva, 2020; Danilova, 2015; Prokopeva, 2015). In Sakha (Yakutia), the water protection narrative is a currently dominating 'water narrative' despite devastating floods (Stammler-Gossmann, 2012). It is true in many other Indigenous contexts, as in the well-known case of the Standing Rock protest movement with strong female leadership of LaDonna Brave Bull Allard (Chavez & Pember. 2021). The water protection is a powerful narrative on its own connected to other Indigenous and female led initiatives around the world.

Meanwhile, fighting, not protection, has become a dominating 'forest narrative' in Sakha (Yakutia). While 'protection' is informed by female perspectives and caretaking experiences, 'fight' belongs more to a masculine conceptual field, especially when militarized language is used in the firefighting structures, such as *desant* [Ru. 'troops'] or *brigada* [Ru. 'brigade']. In connection to it, limiting the understanding of women in firefighting by caretaking roles diminishes them to mere service providers. Thus, the female caretaker role should be understood beyond these meanings in relation to greater processes of life support to avoid its usage as an "archetype that supports the patriarchal militarism" (Kaplan, 1994: 123). With shifting the paradigm more questions would arise. For example, an A.D.I.R (actors, drivers, impacts and responses) framework looking at those elements altogether will ensure gender informed analysis and further, gender informed intervention (Seager, 2021).

Very much like water protection activism, "using trees as the entry point" (Green belt movement 2003) might be useful in the case of forest protection in Sakha (Yakutia). The example of Wangari Maathai and planting trees movement in Kenya offers an insightful and instructive framework and perspective on environmental justice that challenges patriarchal structures (Muthuki, 2006). Moreover, other studies done in Kenya and Nepal suggest reasons that limit women's involvement in forestry projects: limited access to productive resources, limited decision-making roles, limited participation in the labor market and lack of incentives for project workers to incorporate women (Boyer-Rechlin, 2010). At least two of them – limited access to productive resources and limited decision-making roles – might be applicable to the case. These suppositions require deeper analysis in the future. While water protection activism in Sakha (Yakutia) connects to other Indigenous and female led initiatives around the world, the same approach might benefit the forests protection if connected to globally renowned initiatives.

The feminization of wildfires narratives is thus a counter discourse to the masculinized; it is "celebrating feminine values as an important contribution to the achievement of peace, economic justice, and ecological sustainability" (Ingólfsdóttir, 2011). Also, a feminist perspective on the wildfires can be seen as an alternative to 'white technomasculine' (Bell et al., 2020) aerial views on the forests which are used as the primary control method (Sokolov et al., 2003). This aerial view is now going even further up with the introduction of satellite imagery. These methods used for both monitoring and research drive our views away from human communities and their everyday relations to lands and waters by making them invisible. Therefore, they should be used along with research done in the field, on the grassroots level. This is the knowledge which is equally valuable

for understanding climate change, and these two systems of 'air-born' and 'grass-born' knowledges should work together.

Conclusion

In recent decades, Sakha (Yakutia) has literally gone through fire and water. The devastating floods and wildfires have heavily impacted several rural Indigenous communities that still rely on land-based activities both in terms of subsistence and cultural identity. There are differences how two disasters are approached: despite the devastating effects of floods, the dominating water narrative is water protection with strong female agency. Wildfires discourse is dominated by firefighting narratives. Forest protection, unlike water protection, is almost non-present. Unlike water, the forests are imbued with masculinity on cultural, social and political level, which impacts the ways they are managed and protected from wildfires. In order to change the established unsustainable approach to forests, shift in paradigm is needed – we can change our perspective from fighting wildfires to protecting the forests. This shift would change the often-limited perspective of 'what to fight' to a more productive and critical 'what to protect' and 'what to take care of'. It might help address and focus our attention to the root causes of the wildfires.

In Indigenous feminist paradigms, protecting waters and forests means taking care of our human and *other-than-human* relations and, on a greater scale, our *ways-of-being* in this world. Wildfires threaten the wellbeing of all living things, as well as economies and infrastructures. Moreover, in Sakha (Yakutia), they induce permafrost thaw and landscape degradation. Forests preserve permafrost, the foundation of our culture and identity shaped by the coldest climate on the Earth. Last summer, women, children and elders fought wildfires along with men to protect their relations and ways-of-being in this world. Therefore, assumptions about Indigenous women in the Global North feeling the climate change in indirect ways (unlike women in Global South) diminish and make their struggles invisible in one of its remotest and marginalized areas.

However, as much as it is harmful for people to put on them the pressure of adaptation to climate change, it is equally harmful to think of them as mere victims, inherently vulnerable and powerless. The wildfires of summer 2021 in Sakha (Yakutia) have demonstrated the potential of female leadership in disaster mitigation and management. It is necessary to include women in these processes as their knowledge and experience can strengthen the social and political response to challenges caused by climate change. In order to do so, we should concentrate not only on disaster itself, but most importantly, on post-disaster processes.

This paper did not intend to address the adaptation, resilience and vulnerability, though these concepts are directly connected to gender, indigeneity and climate change. These concepts are now being critically addressed since often pressure and responsibility to adapt are put on people, not on the root causes. Indigenous peoples throughout the world have been adaptive and resilient for centuries, enduring impacts of colonialism and industrialization. However, there are limits to Indigenous resilience and adaptive capabilities. The pressure of adaptability and resilience should be put on the unsustainable systems and structures which should be held accountable for creating and supporting these power relations, domination and inequality.

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Post-Script

Climate change as a metaphor: the world where men fight and women protect

Background

On the forefront of climate change in the Arctic, indigenous men fight wildfires, women protect waters. This commentary employs this dichotomy as a metaphor to better understand larger processes shaping current situation in Russia. On September 25, a few days after the mass mobilisation started in Russia, women of Yakutsk held a peaceful protest. They performed a traditional circle dance until police intervened. Female protesters had been protecting *their men* and have been threatened and detained by *other men*. The female protests in Sakha (Yakutia) was one of a few taking place in Russian Federation those days so it caught the attention of many Russian and international media outlets. However, in academic research, female protest in Sakha (Yakutia) should be covered and analysed by Sakha women themselves. Let us read, see, and listen to women who protect and protest.

Question of epistemological justice

Considering current, and most importantly, future lack of our voices in international academic fora, our voices may be appropriated by outsider researchers who will then get all the benefits, not giving anything back to the communities affected. Recently, a friend of mine, an early-career scholar and native anthropologist themselves, had been approached by a researcher from a European country. My friend was asked by that person for assistance in establishing contacts among Buryat men who fled to Mongolia to avoid mass mobilisation. The further intention of that person was to apply for a research grant in Europe. This is a demonstrative example of how the industry of knowledge extraction keeps reaping benefits from conflicts and disasters hitting the poorest, most marginalized, and neglected groups. Benefiting and building careers on such data should be strongly discouraged as they are exploitative, extractive, and colonial in nature. Instead of framing people as a study subject, one should help them become actors. It can be done by sharing resources and power. Let us bring epistemological justice and not extract, appropriate, and benefit from tears and fears of women.

Question of agency

Our roots grow deep into the frozen ground. Today this ground is rapidly thawing, degrading and falling through, literally and figuratively. How do we keep ourselves and our roots alive? How does one keep agency when everything has been taken, native lands and waters lost to extractive industries, men taken to death and voices being shut and appropriated? How to not completely lose capacity of acting when actions are not allowed? Our tears and panic attacks, late over-the-tea discussions in small kitchens of panel blocks, sleepless nights filled with anxiety, phone calls, and messages, belong to nobody but us. This time, we have too much to lose. *This time, we should and will own our voices*. It comes through owning our pain and facing the reality. Using this kind of

approach it is truly in our powers to contribute to better, just future for all of us in a world where women do not face risks protecting their human and non-human relatives.

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