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To cite this article: Tatiana Wara & Mai Camilla Munkejord (2016): (Re)creating gender hierarchies within northern landscapes: a study of stories about nature and gender, Journal of Gender Studies, DOI: [10.1080/09589236.2016.1239572](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1239572)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1239572>



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Published online: 05 Oct 2016.



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## (Re)creating gender hierarchies within northern landscapes: a study of stories about nature and gender

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines how gender hierarchies are (re)created within the context of northern landscapes. We analyse data from fieldwork and interviews with middle-class female Russians having settled in a small town in northernmost Norway, most of them as marriage migrants. Inspired by the phenomenology of the body, feminist phenomenology and gender theory, the analysis shows how the participants talk about nature as 'recreation' and 'poetry', but also as a venue that is vital for (re)shaping their gendered identities. In particular, the Russian women talk about their strong, skilful outdoors Norwegian husbands as 'experts' in nature, and about themselves as 'novices'. This 'expert–novice' relationship creates a hierarchical distinction between the Norwegian man and the Russian woman, but also attributes additional value to the equality-oriented, but in several cases neither highly educated nor highly paid, Norwegian husband. Through this 're-masculinisation' of their Norwegian partners, the Russian women create a complementary, but subordinate space for themselves. The analysis reveals that our participants situate themselves in contrast to the Norwegian equality ideal while creating a room of their own where they can form a separate and unique Russian femininity. This illustrates how constructions of gender are interwoven in translocal 'minoritising' and 'majoritising' processes.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 March 2016  
Accepted 15 September 2016

### KEYWORDS

Gender; migration; phenomenology; Russians; Northern Norway; nature

### Introduction

I'll never forget it, my first trip outdoors with my boyfriend. I felt both small and vulnerable in the surrounding nature, yet with a tall and strong man beside me. Through this experience, he was transformed from a naive and amorous boy into a man with a big 'M!' (Valeria)

The dissolution of the Iron Curtain and the subsequent moderation of political relations between Russia and Norway in the 1990s led to a steady growth in the flow of goods, ideas and people across the border. Although east–west migration was rare before the 1990s, the number of Russian immigrants in Norway rose to 16,412 in 2014 (Statistics Norway 2014).<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the 1990s, Russian migration was driven primarily by economics given that the severity of conditions in post-Soviet Russia. However, over time, the motivations for migration have become more diverse and include specialist work, as well as education and lifestyle (Johanson & Olsen, 2012). Flemmen (2008) notes that although this phenomenon was uncommon prior to 1990, the number of marriages between Russian women and Norwegian men has increased since the opening of the border and has currently stabilized at an annual level of 300–400 marriages (Flemmen, 2008, p. 114).

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This article<sup>2</sup> examines how gender hierarchies are (re)created within the context of northern landscapes by analysing the narratives of female Russian immigrants having settled in Finnmark, most of them with a Norwegian man. We take inspiration from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1994), feminist phenomenology (Ahmed, 2004) and Hanne Haavinds' theory of gender (1994, 1998) in our examination of how the Russian-Norwegian heterosexual relationship is shaped through stories about outdoor recreation. As will be elaborated in this article, the women's experiences of nature were narrated through popular Russian poetry. Moreover, when analysing the women's stories about practicing outdoor activities, we find that *she* often constructed herself as a 'novice' whereas *her Norwegian male partner* was constructed as an 'expert', hence consolidating a Russian-Norwegian heterosexual relationship characterized by 'dichotomization' and 'hierarchization' to use the concepts of Haavind (1998).

It should be noted that Russian female migrants for a long time have been portrayed in various, mainly negative ways in northern Norwegian newspapers (Flemmen, 2007). In particular, they have been represented as illegitimate love migrants settling in Norway with a Norwegian partner for 'economic convenience' rather than 'pure love'. The narratives analysed in this article should be interpreted as a kind of counter-discourse within this context of pejorative media representations of female Russians, explaining that they, *personally*, have made a good choice when settling with a Norwegian man in Finnmark, despite what could be deduced from reading newspapers.

We begin by introducing the conceptual and methodological framework adopted before presenting the analysis of the empirical data. The article ends with conclusions and suggestions for future research.

## Norwegian nature as a context for analysing gender. Theoretical perspectives

In this study we examine how gender is constituted in the context of the natural environment/nature. We conceptualise nature as a materiality in terms of water, forests, fjords, mountains, and mountain plateaus where social and cultural practices take place (Førde & Magnussen, 2012; Simonsen, 2001), and hence as an arena where (gendered) meanings are created. Ortner (1974) was among the first to argue that femininity seems to be universally conceptualised as complementary but subordinate to masculinity. She further claimed that this construction was related to understandings of nature and culture; that is, women were symbolically associated and identified with nature through their reproductive tasks, while men were symbolically associated and identified with culture (Ortner, 1974). This dichotomy has inspired analyses of gender based on opposites such as private–public and reproduction–production (Rosaldo, 2001). Building on these perspectives, Haavind (1998) argues that gender may be conceived as a social code that positions phenomena as either feminine or masculine through dichotomization and hierarchization (Haavind, 1994, 1998). Dichotomization entails that some phenomena (connoted as feminine) are made incompatible with other phenomena (connoted as masculine) through 'not being what the other is' (Haavind, 1998, p. 264). Hierarchization on the other hand involves a ranking, placing the 'masculine' in a superior position in relation to the 'feminine' (Haavind, 1998, p. 264). Further, Haavind (1994, 1998) understands the body as a 'sign' that all persons carry, and to which we all adjust. In line with Haavind, we understand gender as a *social code* that provides a framework for interpreting women's and men's practices, such as in the context of outdoor recreation, which is the empirical focus of this paper.

Hence, considering nature as a material *and* sociocultural context, we examine how nature is vital to the Russian women's accounts of how they (re)construct their own, as well as their partners', gendered identities as a heterosexual and hierarchical relationship. In order to do so, we draw on research relating to how nature (in the following citation conceptualized as 'place') and gender, mutually constitute each other (Little, 2002; Little & Panelli, 2007; McDowell, 1999). In this regard, Gunnel Forsberg (2001, p. 161) states,

To say that spatial location matters implies that place and gender are mutually constructed and inseparable. ... Both places and people are social constructions that influence the notion of what it means to be masculine or feminine.

Forsberg's argument, which builds upon the work of McDowell (1999), among others, implies that constructions of masculinity and femininity will have different expressions in different local contexts. In this regard, it may be relevant to refer to Little and Panelli's (2007) study of an Australian television series in which male farmers living in the outback searched for women with whom to share their lives. In their article, the authors analyse how nature and heterosexuality mutually constitute each other:

Nature can be harsh, brutal and alien, testing and challenging the development of sexual relationships. At the same time, it can be gentle, harmonious and nurturing, providing a positive and supportive context/influence on the performance of (heterosexual) sexuality. ... By showing how sexual relationships unfold in complex interaction with nature we see how both society and space are, in post-structural terms, constantly becoming. (Little & Panelli, 2007, p. 186)

In this article, it is relevant to understand gender in the light of Haavind's gender theory (1994, 1998), as well as more recent analysis of how gender is constructed differently *in place*, as developed in various publications (Aure & Munkejord, 2015; Brandth & Haugen, 2005; Forsberg, 2001; Frohlick, Dragojlovic, & Piscitelli, 2015; Little & Panelli, 2007; McDowell, 1999; Robinson, Hockey, & Meah, 2004). The way gender relates to mobility, or migration, is also relevant to this paper. It has been noted that migration shapes power relations within and between social groups across gender, place, age and class (Gullestad, 2006; Walsh, Valestrand, Gerrard, & Aure, 2013). Migration privileges some (majoritized subjects) and not others (minoritized subjects), and in addition creates both connections and disconnections in gendered meanings and in gendered positions through, for example, the use of landscapes. This will be further elaborated in this article.

## Research methodology and context

Finnmark is a vast region of 48.637 km<sup>2</sup>. Despite the dimensions, however, only 75,000 people<sup>3</sup> live there, of whom 6773 are immigrants. These immigrants originate primarily from Russia (1096 of whom 767 are women) and Finland (908) and then from Poland (510) and Lithuania (471) (Special Tables, Statistics Norway). The region is located between 70 and 71 degrees north. The majority of people live along the coast in small towns and fishing villages. Fisheries have long played a crucial role (Gerrard, 2005, 2013) along with small-scale peasant farming. However, skilled employment in the public welfare sector and in industrial mega-projects based on the extraction of natural resources, such as gas, oil and minerals, has become increasingly important (Aure & Munkejord, 2015).

In order to obtain a description of the participants' own understandings of nature and outdoor recreation, a qualitative, interpretative approach was considered most appropriate (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013; Haavind, 1999). Narratives are often used within interpretative methodology to explore how individuals comprehend their everyday life situation because telling their stories enables individuals to draw on memories and current experiences and hence to link the past and the present (Cullum, 2003). We understand our participants' narratives as 'constructions of a collective memory' (Simonsen, 2005, p. 83). The participants' stories draw on historical and cultural myths as well as significant events in their own biography. Moreover, we assume that our participants' narratives are shaped in the dialogue between the researcher and the participant(s) (Haavind, 1998, 1999). This means that we perceive our interviews as *an interactive context for storytelling*, in which ongoing discursive processes are integrated into the immediate, moving, cognitive and speaking bodies. Interestingly, in the interviews, the participants and the first author interchangeably talked about their 'common past' in Russia and their 'common present' in Norway where they had all had settled as immigrants.<sup>4</sup>

The fieldwork was conducted in five field trips (each of one week's duration) to Finnmark in 2012–2015. During the field visits, the first author did participant observation, four focus group interviews (Wilkinson, 1999) and individual narrative interviews (Andrews et al., 2013) with a total of 21 female Russian immigrants. Most participants were interviewed several times. The first interviews were open, highlighting the participants' stories about their background in Russia, their migration story (why and how), and their stories about settling and living in Finnmark, northernmost Norway. The focus group interviews and the follow-up interviews concentrated on specific themes such as the participants'

stories about northern landscapes as well as their experiences with outdoor recreation. The narratives from these interviews were thematically analysed and are presented below to illustrate how gender is constructed as a hierarchical relationship in the context of nature.

At the time of the interviews, the women were aged from 20 to 55 and had lived in Norway between 1 and 20 years. All the migrants had grown up in a city, half of them in north-west Russia (with a cold climate quite similar to that of Finnmark) and half of them in cities in other parts of Russia. Most of the participants (13) were marriage migrants who had settled in Finnmark after marrying a Norwegian man; of these women, four were divorced (and single) at the time of the interview, one had remarried, and eight were still in their first marriage in Norway. Three of the participants had obtained residence permits as 'expert' labour migrants. Among these three, one was in a relationship with a Norwegian man. Five of the participants had arrived in Finnmark as students. At the time of the interviews, three of them were active students with a temporary student visa,<sup>5</sup> whereas two of them had settled down as marriage migrants after having met a Norwegian man. All the participants had experienced higher education or were students.

During the field visits, in addition to doing interviews, the author spent time with the participants in various social contexts, such as women's evenings, the local swimming pool, a sauna, skiing trips and Christmas celebrations and other events organized by the local Russian association. Also, the researcher joined tours of the town, and informal outdoor trips, such as picking mushrooms. Although the first author had many informal conversations with the participants, the data analysed for the purpose of this article were constructed during more formalized interviews that were recorded, transcribed<sup>6</sup> and translated by the first author.<sup>7</sup> The first and second authors collaborated closely on the thematic analysis of the interview material as well as the conceptualization and writing of this article.

## Stories of Norwegian nature: results and analysis

### *Nature as poetry*

We start this section with an excerpt from the first focus group interview. The quote illustrates how education, literature, nature, and culture are incorporated into the sentient body:

**Valentina:** We grew up [in Soviet times] with the same fairy tales, films, comics, and especially the same literature. We were brought up with Tatjana Larina from *Eugene Onegin*, and with Natasha Rostova and awkward Pierre from *War and Peace*, and these characters still feature in jokes and not least in our mentality. Although they are fictional literature heroes, they are also *within* us in some way. They are in our flesh, blood and heart! We recall their characters and characteristics in different moments of contemplation or consideration. In a way, they are counselling us. We are nurtured with culture and literature, whereas Norwegians are nurtured with nature. (...) We take in nature through the aesthetic and emotional, through Turgenev's descriptions, and not least Pushkin's descriptions, such as: 'Frost and sun, what a glorious day! Yet you, my dear friend, are still sleeping!'

**Svetlana:** That is so true! I almost see Pushkin's grandmother in front of me, when she woke up and saw the idyllic countryside.

**Alina:** Surely you mean Pushkin's nanny, Arina Radionovna?

**Svetlana:** I'm sorry! Yes, of course! Arina Radionovna.

The above-described theme was almost identically commented upon in another focus group interview:

I think that it is typically Russian that we interpret nature through literature such as novels and poems, such as through Pushkin. Norwegians have a practical understanding of nature. (Veronika)

The first of the two excerpts above shows that literary heroes were narrated as significant others (Mead, 1967). According to Mariana, when problematic situations occurred, literary characters would be used as 'advisors'. When talking about nature, the participants used various metaphors such as 'beloved children', 'symphony', 'love' and 'ancient knowledge'. Nature can mean many things and be expressed in various ways. This is especially illustrated in Lina's poetic consideration of nature as a 'TV room':

It is impossible to be unmoved. Although I have lived ... here [in Finnmark] for over 10 years, I am completely in love. I have given myself to the serious, proud, beautiful, clean and majestic nature. ... I associate this nature with a beautiful and solemn symphony that must only be enjoyed again and again. I have a 'permanent space at the table' in the mountain of Kvænangen, with the best views of the ocean, as me and my Russian friends refer to it when they come to visit. We usually bring out good food and coffee and eat our lunch there. [laughing heartily].

In a phenomenological sense, the participants' stories highlight their possibilities for orienting themselves in Finnmark as a new home region. Phenomenology encourages us to examine what is 'around' the narratives. Thus, in the next two sections we analyse stories that illustrate nature as an arena that (re)constructs heterosexuality as a hierarchical relationship. The first story shows how nature can represent challenges that must be overcome, and how the Norwegian husband is constructed as a 'prince' who rescues the Russian 'princess' and leads her to safety when an accident occurs. The second story shows how, regardless of her prior knowledge and practical skills, the participants position themselves as novices, while the Norwegian male partner is placed in the role of expert as one who 'knows', 'is able' and who 'fixes things' in the context of outdoor recreation in northern landscapes.

### *Nature as emotional experience*

Anastasia stated that she and her Norwegian ex-husband, Leif, were fundamentally different and that from the start of the relationship, she doubted whether she would have a long-term future with him. According to her, there was one main interest that bound them together: they both enjoyed spending time in nature. One winter, when they had only been together for a short time and when Anastasia was still uncertain about their relationship, a decisive event occurred:

It was Easter. I and my son aged 14 years were invited to join a holiday trip, to a cabin. My ex-husband, Leif, had rented snow scooters. The next day we were going on a trip, we went a long way, at least for a few hours. Then we stopped at a lake to fish, make a fire, and grill food. My son was very keen to drive one of the snow scooters alone, and was allowed to do so. But suddenly my ex-husband yelled: 'No! No! Stop! Stop!' I realised immediately that there was something seriously wrong. The ice farther out on the lake was thin, and suddenly I saw that both the snow scooter and my son were about to fall through and go under! (Anastasia)

Anastasia told that Leif made a very good impression on her in this dramatic situation. He thought of neither the snow scooter nor of his own safety but instead ran towards the hole in the ice and he jumped into the water in order to save her son. He managed to get them both onto the ice. They were soaked and freezing and needed to warm themselves, and luckily, there was a private cabin near the lake. The cabin was locked, but Leif took matters into his own hands and broke a window so that they could enter and start a fire in the stove. Anastasia recounted,

We found wood for the fire as well as tea and some canned food, so we sat there all night and dried our clothes. The experience made a strong impression on me ... So strong that we later married!

Anastasia concluded her story recalling that when, prior to their marriage, the priest had asked them what they had in common, Leif had replied that 'although we have different cultural backgrounds and languages, we have a shared joy of nature, which we can build on'. She laughed, adding: 'That was the only argument he came up with'. The other informants who participated in the focus group interview laughed and began to tell similar stories. Although their experiences were not as dramatic as Anastasia's story, they were equally revealing about how nature, as a context for recreation, had contributed to strengthening the love relationship between themselves and their (future) Norwegian husbands. Olga, for instance, recounted a time when she and her husband, Lars, were on a fishing trip. In fact, she was the one who had insisted that they undertake the trip, although Lars had warned her that the sea was rough and that it would be best to remain on land. While they were fishing and enjoying themselves, the unexpected happened:

All of a sudden, the weather turned bad. We saw that the sea was gradually becoming rougher, but when we were about to return to shore, the engine unexpectedly stopped. I do not remember how long we were tossed around in the turbulent sea, but it felt like an eternity. I clung onto the side of the boat and thought, 'Now, this is the end!'



After a while, they were rescued by a lifeboat that happened to be passing. Olga said that after that experience, she acquired a new respect for the sea. In addition, she added that: 'After this I was even more in love with my husband. It was a strong emotional experience that shifted [my] perspectives and gave me wisdom.'

Anastasia and Olga described their encounters with Norwegian nature as a turning point in their lives. In Anastasia's story, nature put Leif's manhood/masculinity and bravery to the test. He overcame the challenge and emerged as 'a good man'. We might say that he almost became a fairy-tale prince saving the princess (and her son). Lars also demonstrated bravery and generosity in a critical situation. Hence, in these stories, the women fell even more in love with their rescuers, almost as an *effect* of the encounter between his masculine qualities and harsh nature.

In both of the above narratives, one of the main features of the Norwegian male partners' masculinity was their ability to tame or control the natural environment, as shown in earlier studies of masculinity in rural areas (Brandth & Haugen, 2005; Bye, 2009; Gurholt, 2008; Little & Panelli, 2007; Tyler & Fairbrother, 2013). According to Ortner's (1974) and Haavind's (1994, 1998) gender theories, masculinity is often equated to rationality and power, while femininity is often associated with emotions and subordination. Gender, however, continually takes new shapes. This can be understood in relation to what Ahmed calls the impression left by others (2004, p. 25). The impression left by others may be interpreted as an effect of proximity implying that certain actions are repeated, thus leading to the creation of what Ahmed calls 'surfaces' (or gendered structures). Such a perspective invites us to examine *how* gender 'takes (new) shape(s)' (Ahmed, 2004, p. 27) in nature as a heterosexual romantic arena. In this regard, the participants' stories about outdoor recreation are understood as sedimented personal stories (Merleau-Ponty, 1994). Experiences of nature are thus understood as bodily (emotional) and social texts in which collective relationships are expressed through specific individual narratives.

Love is not just the glue for a couple's relationship (Aarseth, 2007), but is often the basis for a marriage (Giddens, 1992). Staying in a relationship or in a marriage, moreover, is no longer a question of 'fate', but represents an ongoing personal choice (Haavind, 1998, p. 251). 'Love' emerged as a sense-making concept in this study. The women stated that they expected respect and love from their husbands as a prerequisite to stay in a relationship. Additionally, their stories suggest that the participants' emotions were often expressed as 'antipathy' or 'passion'. One example is the dramatic situation described by Anastasia, in which her boyfriend turned into a hero when saving her son. The heroic deed moved her body from almost indifference to passion, and the couple later got married. Anastasia's story can be understood as 'a piece of emotional work' that bound romance and marriage together and established the basis for a 'legitimate' transnational marriage. Our analysis shows that romantic stories taking place within the context of nature are relevant for our understanding of how gender may be constructed as a hierarchical relationship. In the next section, we examine *how* this happens.

### ***Nature creates heterosexuality through novice–expert relationships***

In one of the focus group interviews, the female Russian immigrants discussed outdoor life in Norway and having nature available 'on the doorstep' as one of the benefits of living in the rural north. In particular, they talked about the locals' unique expertise in exploring and managing nature, a theme also discussed in other studies (Gurholt, 2008; Pedersen & Humberstone, 2000). As the following narratives show, several participants represented themselves as novices and their Norwegian partners as experts and as men with a capital 'M'. By definition, a novice is a trainee or beginner. This definition has two meanings: first, it implies a subordinate position between the trainee and mentor; second, it attributes to the novice qualities of innocence, naiveté and ignorance that explain the novice's lack of competence. The following analysis shows how the participants establish themselves as novices with reference to both meanings. Valeria's story is a relevant example in this respect: Valeria had moved from north-west Russia to Finnmark as an exchange student approximately 15 years prior to the interview and had since married a Norwegian man, found a steady job and had two children. She explained,

I feel like a novice here! They [the locals] simply see different things in nature than I do. They can [cope with nature] completely intuitively! They can light fires, set up tents in 'one, two, three' ... I'll never forget my first trip with my boyfriend. I felt both small and vulnerable in nature, but with a big and strong man beside me. Through this experience, he was transformed from a naive and amorous boy to a man with a big 'M'! I was flattered and fascinated. It was such an adventure and full of contrasts: my vulnerability to the majestic harsh nature that he was able to conquer ... He won both my confidence and my heart with the first spark for the fire or cast of the fishing rod. He quite simply hooked me! [Laughing] ... We [Russians] enjoy nature too, but in an urban and comparatively feeble way. (Valeria, focus group interview 1)

Another story that shows how gender in nature is narrated through an expert–novice relationship was told by Lina, who originally came from a small town in the north-western part of Russia. She had migrated to Norway as a marriage immigrant approximately 10 years earlier. She had later separated from her husband and was single at the time of the interview. She did not have any children, but had a well-paid job and said that she appreciated her financial independence:

Although I am a so-called urbanite, I could always survive in the wild. I have the necessary skills. I can find food in the form of roots, berries, mushrooms and can orient myself and find my way. I have grown up in northern Russia, where the climate is harsh, and therefore have the sense to dress appropriately for the conditions outdoors. I have the knowledge to survive in extreme situations. But, of course, when I go on a trip with men, I let them do most of the figuring out. Nature is their territory. I would not feel like a woman if I had to make a fire, work things out, and take care of others on such trips. I would never take the initiative when men are present. When I go with girlfriends, then I set to work ... but on a trip with men it is completely different. It is *their* task to provide safety and security. However, I contribute warmth and care. I appreciate a strong, fearless, and resolute man. (Lina, focus group interview 2)

The participants stated that because of their upbringing in different parts of Russia, they held considerable knowledge and expertise related to exploring natural environments. At the same time, they presented themselves as unskilled novices who, in their encounters with Norwegian men, 'lacked' knowledge and expertise. Several of the other participants told similar stories about themselves as *becoming* vulnerable and slightly helpless when they were with Norwegian outdoorsmen who would organize things and provide food and security for everyone. This construction can be related to gender in terms of 'dichotomization' and 'hierarchization' (Haavind, 1994, 1998).

Inspired by Merleau-Ponty (1994), we understand the expert–novice relationship as a *background* that reflects a person's lived experiences in their attitudes, movements and reactions. The fact that the expert–novice metaphor is well known implies that the participants' personal stories about experiences in nature also drew on a historical, cultural and gendered repertoire of existing discourses about Russian women as 'real women' and about men in Finnmark as 'natural men' with a unique ability to deal with nature and its moods. This occurs in interaction with other aspects of subjectivity, such as perception, speech, thought, gesture, involvement, action and interpretation relating to the wider world (Simonsen, 2005). According to Merleau-Ponty (1994), these creative processes involve 'interaction' between the outside world and one's own body. Ahmed (2004) nuances this interaction through what she describes as 'impressions left by others', or what we can call effects of proximity. In our analysis, we consider the participants' experiences an effect of their encounters with majority women and men in different contexts. Such meetings between different surfaces contribute in creating new forms of gendered meanings. This issue will be more closely examined below.

### ***Making the Norwegian male partner just a little more masculine***

It should be noted that the participants were quite happy with their Norwegian husbands: They loved that the Norwegian men were equality-oriented and 'helpful' in the home with care and home-making tasks, as also noted in other studies (Flemmen, 2008). At the same time, although the men were helpful, the female Russian migrants found that their Norwegian partners had lost some of their attractions as '*real men*'. The participants told that they sometimes missed 'romance' or 'passion' in their relationships. The participants' idea of Russian men certainly did not represent an 'ideal masculinity' (Russian men being stereotypically portrayed as patriarchal and alcoholic). However, according to our participants,



Russian men know how to make their partner 'feel like a woman' for instance by presenting 'wonderful poems' or 'bringing flowers'. Hence, we interpret the participants' stories about their strong, skilful outdoors husbands as a strategy to 're-masculinize' their Norwegian partners and to make them just a little more male, and more attractive. In this process, the participants at the same time create a complementary but subordinate space for themselves to thrive as real *women* who can 'bask in the glory' of their Norwegian 'princes'.

According to Haavind (1998, p. 265), the social gender code presupposes the woman's *willingness* to be confirmed as 'subordinate' as her personal and individual choice. This willingness was particularly evident in the case of Lina, who, despite her skills and competence in nature, chose to encode nature and recreational practices as a masculine territory when being in nature together with a male partner. However, when outdoor life was practised among women, she had no problem being an expert. The *novice* thus appears as a position that conveys a relationship between the feminine and the masculine.<sup>8</sup> Later in the interview, Lina noted that the Norwegian idea of equality is 'entirely misunderstood' adding that she did not want a (feminized) man who did 'too much' housework. Her reflection on what she conceptualized as the core of the Norwegian equality ideal can be understood as an 'effect' of how Lina inhabited the world with the majority population in Finnmark (Ahmed, 2004). Moreover, when Lina restricted the role of women in their encounter with men to 'giving warmth and care', we interpret this as an active destabilizing effort *against* the Norwegian equality ideal, which Lina herself summarized as 'sameness' (between men and women). Lina's placement of the nature experience within a heterosexual relationship between a subordinate female novice and a dominant male expert can also be understood as a movement away from what causes discomfort in the new context of settlement. Thus, some of our participants situated themselves in contrast to the Norwegian equality ideal to create a position for themselves from which to form a separate or unique Russian femininity. This illustrates how constructions of gender are interwoven in 'minoritising' and 'majoritising' processes.

In line with Wiestad, we will argue that the above-described understanding of Russian femininity cannot be reduced to an effect of majority and minority female and male *bodies* as the place in which gender is located (Wiestad, 2007). In other words, the Norwegian gender equality ideology itself does not 'place' Russian women's bodies in a novice position. Rather, the female, subordinate novice position is crafted as a relational contrast to the expert position of the Norwegian man. This was most clearly expressed by Lina, when she said that 'I would not *feel like a woman* if I had to make a fire' when being in nature with a man (our emphasis). The quote indicates that her desire to 'feel like a woman' is related to previous cultural, social and personal preferences (including her childhood and youth in Russia during the Soviet time). The crafting of the subordinate female position can be understood as a process that recognizes the masculine Norwegian as the core category against which our participants defined themselves. Thus, the 'expert–novice' relationship not only creates a distinction between the Russian woman and the Norwegian man, but also attributes additional value to the equality-oriented (but often *not* highly educated or highly paid) Norwegian husband, thus transforming him into an attractive and desirable other. To summarize, Valeria's story demonstrates particularly well how *emotions work in space* (Ahmed, 2004). In her story, the relative positions of herself and her Norwegian husband were defined in such a way that Valeria could safely assume the role of the naïve woman who was hooked, while her partner was transformed into an expert.

This analysis has shown how the Norwegian man with a capital M is constructed through a heterosexual passion between the subordinate feminine and the dominant masculine. Moreover, the study suggests that outdoor recreation in Finnmark establishes an arena that enables female immigrants to combine Russian and Norwegian understandings of femininities and masculinities, thus creating new gendered meanings and positions for themselves. Our analysis has also shown that for our participants, nature in Finnmark constitutes an arena that gives them space and the opportunity to perform not only their femininity but also their 'Russianness' in new ways making them feel 'at home in the north'.

## Conclusions

In their article, Panelli and Little state that

the ongoing interplay between the natural and the human is evidenced and reproduced through *embodied practices of sexuality* – the valuing or degrading of particular attributes or weaknesses, the assumptions about the appropriateness of certain forms of human relations in defined spaces. (Little & Panelli, 2007, p. 186)

By analysing Russian female immigrants' stories about nature-related practices and their experiences of nature *together* with their Norwegian partners in Finnmark, this article contributes to an understanding of how gender is constituted in the context of nature. Our analysis has shown how the participants construct nature not only as an arena for recreation but also as an arena for 'poetry' and 'romance'. Nature, then, may be conceived as a venue that shapes gender in ways that seem to strengthen the relationships of heterosexual couples, particularly through expert–novice relationships. In general, our analysis reveals that what is constructed as masculine (the male expert) is considered more important, more skilful and more powerful than what is constructed as feminine (the female novice). The 'expert–novice' relationship thus creates a hierarchical distinction between the Norwegian man and the Russian woman; at the same time, this relationship re-establishes the Norwegian husband as a 'real man'. Through this 're-masculinisation' of their Norwegian partners, the Russian women create a complementary, but subordinate space for themselves. At the same time, the analysis reveals how gendered identities are deeply connected to the lived experience of national identity among Russian women who have settled in Finnmark (with a Norwegian man). However, gendered meanings change with regard to what is common in statistical terms and with regard to what is expressed as desirable in a cultural sense, as also argued by Haavind (1998). This article suggests that femininities and masculinities are not stable phenomena, but rather are shaped relationally through the everyday lives of classed, gendered and ethnicized bodies within and between concrete places.

In future research, it would be interesting to examine how gender is constructed not only in the context of nature, but also in different everyday life contexts. This should be done among differently classed and ethnicized women and men, and in the context of different welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990) as one may assume that the state has a considerable capacity to shape gender relations in society through, for example, equality-oriented discourses as suggested in this article.

## Notes

1. <http://www.ssb.no/befolkning/statistikker/innvbef/aar/2014-04-24?fane=tabell&sort=nummer&tabell=176208>.
2. Many warm thanks to Catriona Turner who has translated a (much) earlier version of this article from Norwegian to English.
3. Statistics Norway, 2013: <http://www.ssb.no/befolkning/statistikker/folkendrkv/kvartal/2014-02-20?fane=tabell&sort=nummer&tabell=164147>.
4. It should be noted that during interviews, only female Russian immigrants were present, and conversations took place in Russian.
5. This migration background is in line with the general pattern of Russian migration to Norway as noted in an article in Barents Observer from 2015 stating that 70% of all Russian migrants are female marriage migrants: <http://barentsobserver.com/en/society/2015/07/38-russian-immigrants-norway-live-north-31-07>.
6. The quotes appear as relatively 'clean'. The reason for this is that we have mainly focused on translating *the meaning* of the citations, first from Russian to Norwegian (for the first and second author to do the analysis together), and thereafter from Norwegian to English for the purpose of writing this article. In this double process of translation, we have not 'translated' either hesitations or interruptions, such as when informants in the focus group interviews asked each other to send the bread or beverages.
7. The second author, in other words, did not participate in the data collection.
8. We have no information on how Lina would have positioned herself if she had been discussing a Russian man rather than a Norwegian man in the context of nature.

## Acknowledgements

Warm thanks to Halldis Valestrand, Siri Gerrard, Marit Aure and to all the other participants at the Mobile Lifestyles workshop in Tromsø in October 2015 for fruitful comments to an earlier version of this paper, and thanks to Catriona Turner for having translated an early version of this article from Norwegian to English. We also thank the reviewers and editor for fruitful comments that contributed to clarifying our analysis and findings.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This work is funded by the University of Tromsø, the Arctic University of Norway. The study has been affiliated to the research project Mobile Lifestyles financed by the Norwegian Research Council [grant number 214265].

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