

## The silenced genocide: Why the Danish intrauterine device (IUD) enforcement in Kalaallit Nunaat calls for an intersectional decolonial analysis

By Naja Dyrendom Graugaard and Amalie Høgfeldt Ambrosius

*Naja Dyrendom Graugaard, Postdoc, School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University, najadg@cc.au.dk, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4255-8822>*

*Amalie Høgfeldt Ambrosius, Independent, [amalie@hoegfeldt.eu](mailto:amalie@hoegfeldt.eu)*

In 2022, it was publicly revealed that Danish authorities have initiated and performed coercive insertions of intrauterine devices (IUDs) in Kalaallit women and adolescents, beginning in the 1960s. This has brought forth public and political calls to action, and an official Danish-Greenlandic commission has been established to investigate this hitherto silenced history (Naalakkersuisut 2023).

As feminist scholars of postcolonial and decolonial studies (one of us Danish/Kalaaleq, one of us non-Kalaaleq), we urge the forthcoming investigations to consider the colonial, racial, and gendered mechanisms of the IUD enforcement practice, and the narratives around it. We hold that apt analysis of Danish IUD coercion and campaigning, its past workings and present consequences, requires specific attention towards how different modes of power and oppression intersect in Danish colonial strategies in Kalaallit Nunaat. While the gendered and racial dynamics of Danish colonization is seldomly analyzed (Loftsdóttir & Jensen 2012; Petterson 2012; 2014; Andersen, Hvenegård-Lassen & Knoblock 2015; Ambrosius 2020; 2022), we argue that the history (and presence<sup>1</sup>) of reproductive control of Kalaallit indeed points to the intimate relations between colonialism, racism, and patriarchy in Danish colonial practices.

The self-imagery of Denmark's role as a colonial power in Kalaallit Nunaat has tended to present itself as benevolent, with good intentions and as 'different' – even 'exceptionally good' – in comparison to other colonial powers (Graugaard 2009; Loftsdóttir & Jensen 2012; Boassen et al. 2022). Historians have also sought to explain Danish colonial atrocities as 'typical to their time' and argue that it is not appropriate to direct critiques towards the Danish colonialists for acting according to past colonial and imperialist ideals.<sup>2</sup> In this commentary, we caution forthcoming analyses of the so-called 'IUD campaign' to be attentive to the blindfolds and colonial amnesia that exceptionalist and explanatory approaches to Danish colonial history tend to produce.

Instead, we suggest that Danish IUD enforcement on Kalaallit women and adolescents should not merely be understood or explained as a side-product of Danish-Kalaallit colonial relations, but as a coercive and strategic measure to control the Kalaallit population – at least, since the beginning of the family planning programme in the 1960s (according to what is currently known). Consequently, we argue that Danish IUD enforcement on Kalaallit is also to be understood as a genocidal practice, "intended to prevent births" in

the Kalaallit population and resulting in the loss of half a generation of Kalaallit people.<sup>3</sup> This hitherto silenced genocide reflects that Kalaallit women, their bodies, and the erasure of their reproductive rights were in fact at the center of Danish (neo-) colonization of Kalaallit Nunaat.<sup>4</sup>

The silenced genocide suggests that Danish colonialism in Kalaallit Nunaat indeed was, and continues to be, an act of gendered violence. To challenge its continuity, we believe it is crucial to scrutinize and uncover the gendered, racial, and colonial mechanisms of the 'IUD campaign'.

### The so-called 'IUD campaign'

Between 1966 and 1970 Danish health authorities inserted approximately 4500 intrauterine devices (IUDs) in Kalaallit women and girls, as was revealed by the DR podcast series 'Spiralkampagnen' last year (Klint & Petersen 2022). The 4500 women and girls (down to eleven years of age, according to recent testimonials), who were either persuaded or coerced to an IUD insertion, represented about half of all Kalaallit women of child-bearing age at the time in Kalaallit Nunaat.

The insertions of IUDs in Kalaallit women were part of a family planning campaign – now popularly known as 'the spiral campaign' or 'the IUD campaign'. While the historical data is still far from exhausted, it has been uncovered that the Danish state initiated the campaign to halt the population growth in Kalaallit Nunaat that had followed an intensive modernization programme launched by the Danish government in the 1950s. The growing Kalaallit population was considered to pose a threat to the Danish state because population increase in Greenland was considered expensive for Denmark to finance (Klint & Petersen 2022).

Moreover, the modernization programme sparked a construction boom, which attracted large numbers of Danish male workers to Kalaallit Nunaat. This resulted in a rise of pregnancies among young Kalaallit women who ended up as single parents, as the Danish fathers would often stay and work for shorter periods of time before

leaving for Denmark again. The young Kalaallit mothers were perceived by the Danish state to pose another challenge to the Danish vision of the modernization process. Becoming mothers prevented these women to engage in further education or vocational training and from partaking in the new labour market, which were central tenets in the Danish vision of 'modernizing Greenland' (Dahl 1986; Arnfred 1994).

As the evidence from the journalistic investigations shows so far, the Danish state initiated the family planning campaign due to the potential socio-economic consequences and costs to Denmark in the case of increased population growth in Kalaallit Nunaat.

In consequence – and as was seemingly intended – the Kalaallit population growth numbers dropped drastically in the 1970s. The 'IUD campaign' continued until 1974, but the number of IUDs in the 1970s has not been registered and the total number of IUDs inserted in the 1970s is therefore unknown (Klint & Petersen 2022). In fact, the testimonies of Kalaallit girls and women indicate that coercive IUD insertion by Danish doctors has continued up to this day, and that the years of the 'spiral campaign' is just a fraction of a practice that extends far beyond the 1960s and 1970s.

Many of the women, who recently stepped forward and publicly shared their stories and encounters with the 'spiral campaign', have reported that they were not informed properly at the time about the insertion of IUDs, and they were not presented with any option to reject it. Many were adolescents in their puberty, not even sexually active, and were sent straight from school by their teacher to the doctor's room for an IUD implementation without the involvement of or consent from their parents. Some of the women have also reported that they were not informed of the insertion of an IUD during their doctor's gynecological examination and therefore experienced years of unexplained infertility and accompanied physical complications. Many of the women have never told their story until the silence on the issue was broken (initiated by Kalaaleq woman Naja Lyberth who was the first to share her story publically,

Møller & Jeremiassen 2023), and many describe it as an experience of sexual assault that has caused serious physical and mental consequences and trauma in their lives.

Until last year this history has been repressed. It has not been publicly known before now and it is a topic that has never been researched. This means that the entire scope of the 'IUD campaign', the extent of its consequences, and the string of events from the political orders of the Danish state to the Danish doctors' room in Kalaallit Nunaat is still to be uncovered.

### 'Getting the story right': Why research into Danish IUD coercion on Kalaallit women calls for a decolonial, intersectional approach

While the gendered and racial dynamics of Danish colonization is seldomly analyzed, the 'IUD campaign' exemplifies that the Danish colonial state similarly to 'big colonial powers' made use of intersecting forms of oppression to control the Kalaallit people. Yet, Danish discourse has often centered on emphasizing how Danish colonialism was 'different', 'well-intended', and more 'benevolent' than other colonial powers. As emphasized by Kristin Loftsdóttir & Lars Jensen (2012), Denmark has, along with other Scandinavian countries, made use of 'small nation discourses' to construct itself as 'innocent' in comparison to larger colonial nations. Consequently, Danish colonial studies is characterized by a lack of examinations and analyses of the many ways in which Denmark employed various colonial strategies and practices to subordinate Kalaallit – and how these were constructed by and with patriarchal, sexist, and racist ideologies.

However, the prevalence, scale, and systematization of the 'IUD campaign' presents evidence that the Danes – like the Brits and the French in their respective colonies – have imposed coercive birth prevention methods to diminish and reduce the Indigenous population. Controlling a

population's fertility has been intrinsic to uphold colonial domination in many colonies, and Indigenous people in settler colonies have been – and continue to be – targets of coerced birth control and forced sterilization (e.g. Atallahjan & Bernard 2022; Basile & Bouchard 2022). Such practices have been characterized as genocide by scholars (Stote 2015; Carranza 2020) and international organizations such as the United Nations<sup>5</sup>. The many silenced stories of Danish IUD coercion in Kalaallit Nunaat that have surfaced over the past year demonstrate that reproductive abuse and violence *also* characterize Danish colonialism, and we thus argue for considering the scale and magnitude of the IUD enforcement as a genocidal practice. The systematic control of Kalaallit women's reproductivity, as well as the omission of seeking and ensuring their consent, demonstrates that Denmark, indeed, exercised a colonial politics infused with ideologies of Danish paternalistic and racial superiority. It shows that Danish colonial rule has been entwined with racial violence in similar ways to that of other colonial powers, and this heavily counters the existing narrative that generally lacks both recognition and analysis of Danish racism and supremacy in Kalaallit Nunaat. Whilst there has been an increasing public and academic attention in recent years towards the psychological and covert racial violence associated with Danish colonization of Kalaallit Nunaat (e.g. Petterson 2012; 2014; Graugaard 2020b), not many scholars have engaged with overt physical racial violence perpetuated as part of Danish colonialism. However, the IUD campaign and its ramifications epitomize the importance of broadening the existing scope of analysis to investigate Danish racial violence in Kalaallit Nunaat further.

The IUD coercion on Kalaallit women shows the pervasiveness of Danish colonialism in Kalaallit Nunaat and how coloniality continued to shape public institutions and their practices long after the formal status as 'colony' was (formally) absolved. As more stories and experiences are voiced and shared, there are indications that Kalaallit women have been targets of Danish IUD coercion – as well as unconsented non-reversible contraceptive

interventions – until a decade ago, if not more recent. These atrocities – past and present – expose the violent character of the Danish engagement in Kalaallit Nunaat, and how Danish policy makers and practitioners have considered Kalaallit women's bodies, their sexual and reproductive rights at the dispense of the Danish state.

In recent years, the Danish public and media have brought attention to the ways in which medicalization of 'different' bodies have had gendered manifestations in Denmark. The case of Sprogø is an example of how the Danish state used medicalizing discourses to control Danish women and their reproductivity.<sup>6</sup> The 'IUD campaign' in Kalaallit Nunaat illuminates another dimension of this history, as it reveals the deeply colonial and racialized mechanisms of Denmark's systematic subordination of Kalaallit women, girls, and bodies. Considering how the Danish state upheld and perpetuated its colonial ideology through colonizing Kalaallit women's bodies from (at least) the 1960s and onwards, we urge forthcoming investigations of the 'IUD campaign' to analyze the intimate relations between colonialism, racism, and patriarchy in the history and presence of Danish reproductive control of Kalaallit.

Meanwhile, we caution against investigations into Danish IUD coercion in Kalaallit Nunaat 'for the sake of research' or for proving specific theoretical standpoints. Taking up this agonizing history as a topic for research requires acute awareness of the colonial legacies of Arctic research and the ways in which research has had, and continues to have, damaging effects on Inuit

communities in the Arctic, including Kalaallit Nunaat (Graugaard 2020a). Such awareness, we believe, involves a refusal of 'damage-centered' research (Tuck & Yang 2014) that sensationalizes, instrumentalizes, and trades stories of Kalaallit people's pain and trauma to be consumed by non-Kalaallit scholars and readers, and expropriated for academic production and discussion.

We hold that breaking the silences on Denmark's reproductive genocide in Kalaallit Nunaat should be done in consolidation with its victims, their lived experiences, epistemologies, and situated knowledges – and it should be vested in unsettling explanatory, exceptionalist narratives and "getting the story right, telling the story well" (Smith 2014) through Indigenous- and Kalaallit-led inquiry and dissemination. As feminist scholars of postcolonial and decolonial studies, we consider the process of uncovering the historical lineages of IUD coercion on Kalaallit women and adolescents as much a study of the present as it is of the past. As the story become unearthed, it also points to its continuity in contemporary Danish state and social service practices, such as abortion persuasion towards expectant Kalaallit mothers, discriminatory 'parent legibility' conducts towards Kalaallit parents, and rocketing numbers of forced removals of Kalaallit children from their families. Thus, the insights gained from investigating Danish IUD coercion should not be relegated to the safety locker of 'history'. They should implicate present Kalaallit-Danish relations and their colonial continuities, and hold accountability to their contemporary consequences.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> As more cases come to light on this history, there are indications that Danish reproductive control of Kalaallit women has been practiced until very recently, and perhaps still is today in different forms, e.g. abortion persuasion.
- <sup>2</sup> To exemplify this approach to Danish colonial history, a Danish researcher and university lecturer responded to one of the author's social media posts that critiqued the missionary Hans Egede's colonial practices and treatment of Kalaallit people, with: "I think it is a bad idea to impose contemporary ideals on people from the 18th century. You should not criticize Egede for living in the Enlightenment period and for acting like a typical 'Enlightenment-man'" (our own translation). Such explanatory approach to Danish colonial history is particularly crystalized in the work of another Danish scholar, Thorkild Kjærgaard, who persistently claims that Greenland was not a colony at all due to the specific historical circumstances of the Norwegian-Danish monarchy in 1721. Some of these scholarly tendencies in contemporary scholarship on Greenland is discussed as 'academic anxiety' and 'Qallunaat fragility', see *Tracing Seal – Unsettling Narratives of Kalaallit-Seal Relations* (Graugaard 2020c).
- <sup>3</sup> From the definition of genocide by the United Nations: <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml> (accessed 15.06.2023)
- <sup>4</sup> The wording '(neo-)colonization' here indicates the ambiguity of the official timeline of Danish colonization in Kalaallit Nunaat. As has been demonstrated, Danish colonization continued, and even intensified, after the official status as 'colony' was formally abolished and Kalaallit Nunaat was annexed as a Danish county in 1953 (Petersen 1995). The ways in which Denmark intentionally avoided decolonising its Greenlandic colony and instead ensured continued Danish control has also been discussed, and most recently elaborated in the book *Imperiets Børn* by Anne Kirstine Hermann (2021).
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml> (accessed 16.06.2023)
- <sup>6</sup> For description of medicalising discourses and Danish women in the context of Sprogø please consult: Kirkebæk, B., 2005. Letfærdig og løsagtig – kvindeanstalten Sprogø 1923–1961 (Dissolute and loose – the institution for women at Sprogø 1923–1961). *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 7(3-4), 229-231.