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Around the World:

Maintaining and Protecting the Cultural Identity of Sami Children in Progressive Nordic Countries: The Laws of Sweden and Its Past and Current Implications on Sami People

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I. INTRODUCTION

Cultural identity is important to promote and maintain, and the recognition of Indigenous peoples' rights to cultural identity and practice is not only necessary to protect cultural identity but to help cultivate its continuation and growth in younger generations. Even in the more progressive Scandinavian countries such as Sweden, there are backwards policies and practices which negatively affect the Indigenous Sami peoples' protection, promotion, and practice of their culture and heritage. These restrictions also have lasting impacts on Sami children and their sense of cultural identity.

The laws and structure of the socially progressive Swedish government display the benefits Sweden has granted to the Sami people and their cultural rights. However, the laws of Sweden also impose and support restrictions and harm toward religious and cultural freedom and practices that significantly affect Sami cultural preservation. While Nordic countries have taken many steps towards cultural preservation of the Sami people, they have also taken steps backwards in the protection and promotion through lack of legislation, education, and broad support for the Sami people and their rights. Sami children are impacted with the contrast between their cultural traditions and societal pressures. The government in Sweden must take necessary action to ensure that Sami children have the opportunity to engage with their heritage. Furthermore, Sweden needs to promote respect for the Sami people as the lack thereof has caused issues of cultural identity, especially for impressionable children.

II. SAMI PEOPLE AND THEIR HISTORY OF CULTURAL PRACTICES AND TRADITIONS

The Sami People are the only Indigenous ethnic group in Europe. They reside within the arctic circle of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Russian Kola Peninsula. Sami people were originally known as Lapps, as the Nordic region was referred to as Lapland or Sàpmi. There are around 80,000 Sami people throughout these four countries today. Sweden informally recognized Sami as an indigenous group in 1977. Sami traditionally are a nomadic group known for hunting and fishing, and have become most notable for reindeer herding, or husbandry. Reindeer husbandry is a less traditional practice than hunting and gathering but is still central to their heritage as Sami. Herding is the livelihood of many Sami people as it is tied to the land, the community, the traditions, the stories, and the language.

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Sami have a deep connection to their language, as it is directly connected to their identity. Their language is also vital to the preservation of their culture because they are an intrinsically oral community and rely on passing stories and traditions down in this manner. In order to be included in the Sami Parliament of Sweden, which is an independent body that is elected by and represents the Sami people in Sweden, one is required to show that they, their parents, or their grandparents first language were Sami.

In the early 1900s, Sweden began enacting assimilation policies aimed toward the Sami. These policies lasted until the 1970s and made it more challenging for Sami to learn and practice their language. Part of the assimilation process required that Sami children placed in Swedish schools only speak in Swedish. Studies and research have emphasized the lasting impact these policies have had on subsequent generations regarding identity

Language is a critical component of Sami identity, and the history of oppression with Sami language and cultural practices including land use and ownership has had a significant impact on the connection with their ancestors and cultural heritage.

III. SWEDEN'S LAWS REGARDING THE CULTURAL PROTECTION AND PRACTICES OF THE SAMI PEOPLE

During the 19th and 20th centuries, Sweden promoted racist and discriminatory treatment towards Sami people. Many Swedes viewed Sami as lesser and thought that their cultural lives and traditions would soon disappear due to the advancements of non-Sami culture and practices. During this time period, Sweden enacted policies which isolated the Sami people from non-Sami society. They diminished the education of Sami children by refusing to admit them into Swedish schools. Surprisingly, this practice promoted the continuance of Sami heritage because Sami children were only able to obtain education within their Sami tribes and communities. This allowed them to learn about their history and strengthen their ties to the land and ancestors. Sweden also removed Sami ownership and use of land for reindeer herding, hunting, and fishing.

Later, Sweden authorized laws which required Sami children to be educated with Swedish children. This process endorsed the ill-treatment of Sami people and their culture and created an identity crisis for Sami children who wanted to conform to Swedish culture and “fit in” with society.

Sweden also enacted legislation that targeted Sami rights within the practice of reindeer herding. In 1886, the Reindeer Grazing Act removed Sami ownership right to land and declared their ancestral lands as the property of the King. However, in 1971 the Reindeer Herding Act was enacted which granted some rights back to the Sami, with a 1993 amendment helped Sami gain even more of their rights to land back. The Swedish Supreme Court has also addressed the issue of land use for reindeer herding since the 1993 amendment passed and concluded that reindeer herding is an immemorial prescription, and the right to use the land is based upon long-term use (over a generation) of such land for reindeer grazing. These laws only permit the use of public and private lands for reindeer grazing. Even still, this right is significant to the preservation of Sami culture through the custom of reindeer herding and nomadic lifestyle that comes with it.

IV. MAINTAINING CHILDREN'S CULTURAL IDENTITY AND RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR COMMUNITY

Sami children are the most impacted by past and current laws and policies of Sweden. In the past, Sweden engaged in a system which held the goal of removing Sami identity and culture in Sami children. Before the late 20th century, Sami language was not taught in schools, and many Sami children were subjected to discriminatory treatment while engaging in non-Sami society. During the early 20th century, children were removed from their homes and prevented from seeing their families while in nomadic schools. Many children, as a result, either attempted to hide their Sami identity or chose to leave their communities and their culture in order to fit into Swedish society. Due to the actions and laws enacted by Sweden, many children and grandchildren became disconnected from their Sami heritage and have lost a part of their identity.

A. Preserving the Sami Language

Language is a principal component to Sami identification for various reasons. There are various dialects of the Sami language, but there are few fluent speakers in any dialect today. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger states that all dialects of Sami language are endangered. Recently, Swedish legislation and societal views have begun to shift away from discriminating Sami and began promoting Sami as an indigenous group within its borders. In 2009, Sweden passed both the Language Act and the Swedish Act on National Minorities and National Minority Languages. The turn of the 21st century encouraged newer generations to reconnect with their Sami heritage that their parents or grandparents had hid or abandoned.

Today, Sweden encourages the teaching of Sami language. In 1976, Sweden passed the Reform of Immigrant Language Teaching which required schools to provide instruction for languages other than Swedish to allow children to develop both. Sweden also has the Sami school which is a compulsory school that conforms to the living conditions of the Sami people and provides education and maintains children's connection to their community.

For Sami children, their parents and family are central in connecting with their cultural language and it is up to the parent to decide whether to teach their children the language, the customs, the activities, the stories, and the beliefs.

B. Maintaining Practice of Reindeer Herding

Currently, there are approximately 4,500 reindeer owners in Sweden, with around ten percent of Sami employed in reindeer husbandry. Typically, those who work within the reindeer herding industry are a nomadic people who travel and follow the herd across Sweden and through Scandinavia. During the period of discrimination and assimilation, many Sami were forced to leave reindeer herding as Swedish settlers began taking over much of the land used for grazing. Because Sweden has shifted to maintain, rather than

diminish, cultural traditions and ties, there have been steps taken to assist reindeer herders in acquiring and using lands to feed and house their reindeer herds.

There are other issues that arise with continuing the tradition of reindeer husbandry or herding in the younger generation of Sami. Many younger Sami feel a sense of pressure to continue and preserve Sami traditions such as reindeer herding. However, there are many issues that deter Sami children from practicing reindeer herding. One issue is that traditionally, herding is male dominant, so women are not encouraged to pursue it as a career. Another issue is that herders still have lost and continue to lose grazing interests, which is the ability of reindeer herds to graze on both public and private lands throughout Sweden.

While reindeer herding is central to the cultural identity of the Sami people, there is not much done by Sweden currently to promote it as a successful career, so many Sami children are less likely to end up herding with traditional Sami methods, and instead assimilate by taking urban jobs. Unlike the issues of discrimination and cultural identity that arises with Sami language, the issues with reindeer herding are more concrete and require a lot of action on part of both the Sami and Sweden in order to promote the work.

V. POLICY AND NONPOLICY CHANGES TO ENSURE CHILDREN HAVE THE ABILITY TO MAINTAIN THEIR CULTURAL IDENTITY

The Sami have their own customary laws within their groupings and shared cultural practices regarding land, water, and resources. The Sami also have their own governmental system, comparable to other Indigenous groups throughout the world, such as the Iroquois in the United States, where there are family groupings who form a collegial council that manages the political and legal functions of the groups. These systems are important and need protection and support from the Swedish government to ensure that the Sami not only maintain their autonomy in their decisions and lives, but to protect and promote the Sami culture and allow it to be passed onto the next generation.

The best way to guarantee that Sami children are learning and engaging with the culture and its traditions is by having the Sami communities be in charge of the decision-making process. In 1992, the Sami Council was enacted and advocated for better land rights, along with promotion of their identity. In 1993, the Sami Parliament was established with its primary purpose being the monitoring of Sami language and culture. However, there must be an expansion of the influence of this Parliament and its relationship with the Swedish government and its other governmental bodies. No one can better represent the interests and rights of the Sami people than the Sami themselves.

Beyond preserving Sami autonomy, the Swedish government must take further steps to assist Sami in protecting their culture by amending their constitution to include and emphasize the rights of the Sami. Sweden has a duty to maintain, promote, and protect Sami cultural practices, and the best way to do that is through legislative change and recognition of said duty. Certifying the safety and continuation of Sami heritage can help Sami children better identify with and preserve their ancestors' traditional ways.

Although land rights are the main topic of discussion regarding Sami people, the government should also focus on education as well. It is not enough that Sami people are

now able to better connect with their heritage and engage in cultural traditions, the government needs to engage in educating non-Sami citizens in order to broaden the understanding and respect of the Sami.

VI. CONCLUSION

The relationship of the Sami people with Sweden has fluctuated throughout the centuries. There is now a positive shift recognizing their rights and cultural importance. The beginning of the 20th century triggered an oppressive and discriminatory system that aimed to extinguish Sami people and their culture. As time moved on, the Swedish began to not only recognize Sami people and their heritage but also work towards protecting and promoting their identity and practices. There is still much that needs to be done, especially in regard to children and their own self-identification.

Most of the younger generation of Sami today want to find a way to reengage with their heritage. The easiest and most important way to do that is through the promotion and teaching of the Sami language. Sweden should take initiative to either provide the language as an option during school, or to provide Sami communities with resources and tools to help promote the teaching of the language on a community-based level. While Sweden does not actively engage in discriminatory behaviors towards Sami anymore, that does not mean that inaction doesn't cause harm. In order to continue the process of restoring and preserving Sami cultural heritage and identification, Sweden should be focusing on providing children with the ability to learn the Sami language and its importance to their people.

While reindeer herding is a more complicated matter in terms of preservation of culture with younger generations, Sweden should still look into providing assistance or make legislative changes to help current herders and promote future ones as well. Similar to the aspect of language, Sweden should either impose tax benefits or breaks for Sami people who herd reindeers. They should also emphasize the Reindeer Herding Act and its 1993 amendment to better address Sami interests compared to non-Sami and state interest. Sami children will not want to engage in reindeer herding if it is an industry with which they will constantly struggle with legally and economically. Sweden must step forward and work with Sami communities on what needs to be done to best address current problems with herding. Children are central to the preservation of the Sami cultural heritage and traditions. Inability to share the heritage with their children threatens the Sami people and endangers their thousands of years of existence within the Nordic countries. Children also should be connected to their heritage because it is a part of who they are, whether they choose to engage in it or not. Removing their connection to Sami culture presents an issue of their self-identification, especially if they choose to later try and reconnect with this part of their identity.

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