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Sweden struggles over child marriage

By Nathalie Rothschild

Politico.eu (23.07.2018) - <https://politi.co/2O21Nlt> - A row over how to deal with child marriage among immigrants has inflamed political debate ahead of a general election in Sweden, where migration continues to divide public opinion and the far right is riding high in the polls.

A tug-of-war between the ruling Social Democrat-Green Party coalition and the opposition over the government's role in managing or eradicating the practice — which predominantly affects young girls, and in some cases boys, from immigrant backgrounds — is emblematic of a broader struggle to find a balance between efforts to integrate a large number of new immigrants and preserve a Swedish way of life.

"Sweden has been bad at providing people who come here with clear information about how our system works, about this society's views on children's rights, gender equality, family policies, and parents' and guardians' responsibilities," said Juno Blom, who is running for parliament on behalf of the opposition Liberal Party.

"While we insist that Sweden protects children's rights and that we promote a child-centered approach to children's welfare, we have allowed children of foreign backgrounds to live as married women with older men," said Blom, who also acts as Sweden's national coordinator to counter honor-based violence and oppression.

Although Sweden is known for its commitment to child welfare, it is failing to extend those same protections to its immigrant population, activists and lawmakers say. Opponents accuse the government of being overly cautious in order to avoid being seen as culturally insensitive.

Official data suggests child marriages are relatively rare among Sweden's newly arrived immigrant population. A 2016 report by the Swedish Migration Agency only identified 132 underage asylum seekers who stated they were married when they arrived in Sweden. Most came from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq and applied for asylum in Sweden after August 1, 2015, at the height of the refugee crisis that brought 163,000 asylum seekers to Sweden in just a year.

But the real number is probably higher, authorities caution, as many cases likely go unreported.

Pamphlet panned

Although Sweden in 1973 banned marriages in which one or both parties is underage, it was possible under some circumstances to get special dispensation. The previous center-right government tightened the law in 2014, amid growing awareness of the prevalence of so-called honor-related oppression — including forced marriage — among some immigrant communities.

Still, marriages between underaged partners are recognized — and not annulled — if carried out abroad. The government has come under pressure to close that legal loophole and invalidate all marriages that involve minors. But it declined to vote for a proposal — put forward by parliament’s committee on civil affairs this spring — that would do so, saying it was formulating its own plan to tighten existing laws.

The government’s proposal — which it finally put forward in May — would mean Sweden does not recognize marriages carried out abroad where one or both parties were under 18. It would also require spouses who are over 18 when they arrive in Sweden (but married when they were underage) to renew their vows in order to be legally recognized as married. However, critics say it is unclear how authorities would enforce the rule in practice.

A government pamphlet issued by its National Board of Health and Welfare and targeted at adults with underage spouses also drew fierce criticism, including from Cabinet ministers, for treating the issue too lightly and not clearly communicating that child marriage is against both Swedish law and cultural norms.

The government says it now has a clear and firm position.

“There is no retroactivity in Swedish legislation but our stance is that we should not recognize marriages where either of the parties is a child or was a child when he or she got married,” said the minister for children, Lena Hallengren, a Social Democrat.

“That would run counter to the international commitments Sweden has made to ensure that children are entitled to their childhood.”

But for some, such statements are too little, too late.

The far-right Sweden Democrats, who have been climbing steadily in the polls in recent months, have seized on the issue. In a video posted on the party’s Facebook page, leader Jimmie Åkesson hit out at the government, saying: “I don’t know what there is to think about. It is, frankly, totally sick that one can’t just simply say no to something as bizarre as grown men having the right to marry children.”

Åkesson held up the much-maligned pamphlet and called on those responsible for producing it to be fired or resign. “There’s an election on September 9,” Åkesson reminded viewers.

Opposition’s opportunity

In June, three weeks after the government finally presented its proposed legal amendment, the Liberal Party presented its own list of proposed measures to tackle honor-based oppression, which party leader Jan Björklund called “the greatest challenge to equality” in Sweden.

The proposals included travel bans for families suspected of planning to bring their daughters abroad to marry them off or to have them undergo female genital mutilation. Under the Liberals’ proposal, authorities would also be able to confiscate families’ passports and make parents attend meetings with social services. They also proposed tougher punishments for those found guilty of forced marriage, as well as the extradition of foreigners convicted of crimes with honor motives.

“What irks me is that we treat young people and children with foreign backgrounds differently from those with roots in Sweden,” Blom said, recalling a case in which a 19-

year-old Afghan girl was allegedly murdered by a much older husband less than a year after she arrived in Sweden from Iran in September 2015.

Her husband was eventually found in Iran in May and extradited to Sweden in June.

The case, Blom said, got “relatively little attention in the media” and did not spark much political reaction. “If a Swedish teenager had been found murdered and buried, my guess is it would have caused outrage.”

The phenomenon of underage marriages predates the major influx of asylum seekers in 2015, but has become harder to ignore as a result of the higher numbers of new arrivals, according to Blom.

“We saw an upswing in calls to our national support hotline, which professionals like social workers can dial to get advice on how to deal with honor-based oppression,” Blom said, referring to the 2015 influx. “The social workers who called us had met girls who were married to men and who were placed in their municipalities. They didn’t know what to do with them.”

Legal loopholes

A number of young women born and raised in Sweden are also at risk of being exploited as a result of the legal loophole that allows underage marriages carried out abroad to be recognized in Sweden.

The national unit against honor crimes, headed by Blom, last year launched a campaign to encourage young people to contact Swedish authorities after it found that girls were being sent to their parents’ home countries over their summer holidays to be married to older men.

“People see young girls as their sons’ tickets to Europe,” said Zubeyde Demirörs, a 45-year-old social worker who runs a shelter for victims of honor-based violence and oppression.

Demirörs has personal experience of the issues she works on. She was 15 years old and had just finished ninth grade — the last year of compulsory schooling in Sweden — when her parents took her to their hometown in Turkey to marry a man 22 years her senior with whom she would have three children.

“We had a large extended family in Stockholm but unlike them my parents, siblings and I did not live in an immigrant-dense area and so my parents were concerned that my sisters and I would become assimilated,” Demirörs said. “The idea was that if we got engaged, we would be somehow tied to our roots and could also avoid suspicious looks from the rest of the community.”

It took her 16 years to leave her husband, she said. “When I left him, I was alone,” she recalled. “Practically the whole family turned against me and there was little support to seek from Swedish society at the time.”

Demirörs’ case is far from unique, she said: “In my work, I hear similar stories every day.”

When it comes to forced marriage, the summer is the worst period of the year, said Demirörs.

“This time of year my phone just doesn’t stop ringing. May, June, July — that’s when many girls are taken back to their parents’ home countries, mostly to rural parts of the Middle East and Africa.”

Demirörs fears the government’s proposed new law would not make much difference.

“Over the years, I’ve seen legal amendments, I’ve seen campaigns ... And still, we keep coming back to square one. Now we have new challenges, with a large number of people coming to Sweden from societies where honor culture is the norm.”

Sweden, she said, needs to take proper responsibility for the immigrants it takes in. That involves extending the same protection and rights to all children, regardless of whether they are ethnically Swedish or not.

“But our politicians are cowardly,” she said. “They are afraid of taking a principled stance on these issues for fear of being labeled culturally insensitive.”

“It’s different in our neighboring countries. In Denmark and Norway, they’re not afraid of being called racists. And over the years many girls — and boys — in Sweden have suffered for that cowardice.”