



Government Offices of Sweden

Speech from Ministry of Employment

Åsa Lindhagen speech at UPR

Published 27 January 2020

Geneva, January 27, 2020 Check against delivery

Madam President, excellencies, distinguished members of the UPR working group,

“Can you tell me when something begins? One grain of sand is added to another, and before you know it, you have a heap of sand right in front of your eyes.”

These are the words of Hédi Fried, Swedish Holocaust survivor, child psychologist and tireless educator on antisemitism. Her books are read by many Swedes. They describe how conditions for Jews changed in her hometown – now in present-day Romania – step by step, almost imperceptibly at first.

Millions of men, women and children were brutally murdered in the Holocaust. Today, the 27th of January, is International Holocaust Remembrance Day. It is an important reminder that human rights can never be taken for granted. The fight for human dignity, and the enjoyment of human rights for all, is our responsibility and we must succeed.

Madam President,

There is a cold wind blowing over the world these days. It challenges our common values, it wants us to value people differently – based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion or age. We have felt these winds before.

But rather than bow down, we have learned that our societies are much stronger when we stand up for the equal value of all persons. When we build our societies based on courage, not fear.

But a lot still remains to be done.

To make sure everyone can live in freedom and is afforded respect.

To make sure persons are not marginalised, not exposed to discrimination, hate crime, gender-based violence and honour-related crimes.

It is vital for the wellbeing of many, in particular women, young persons, persons with disabilities, Jews and other minorities. Persons who are exposed to racism and violence on a daily basis.

To tackle these challenges, we need strong and open societies and well-functioning multilateral systems and mechanisms.

We need more cooperation, not less.

The ongoing climate crisis is a threat to life on this planet, to human existence. We must urgently build environmentally sustainable societies to tackle the climate crisis. We are all part of this world, we are all interdependent.

Madam President,

As you all know, the Universal Periodic Review is vital for promoting and upholding human rights, democracy and the rule of law around the world.

Safeguarding the rule of law is high on the Swedish Government's agenda. An independent judiciary and a well-functioning and trustworthy justice system are essential foundations of a democratic society.

Sweden is striving for greater transparency on the human rights situation in our country, including through dialogue with civil society organisations.

Their views, and at times criticism, are of great importance to the Swedish Government. We have held several rounds of consultation with civil society organisations prior to this review, and I welcome the presence of Swedish and international civil society organisations here today.

Since the last Universal Periodic Review of Sweden, significant steps have been taken to ensure Sweden's full respect and fulfilment of our international obligations on human rights.

But challenges still remain, and we look forward to discussing them with you

here today.

Your recommendations are highly valuable for our continued national development, and I want to thank you in advance for your contributions.

My delegation includes representatives from several government ministries, reflecting the importance Sweden attaches to this review.

I will now begin by addressing some of the issues raised in advance and highlight some achievements and challenges in our work.

My colleagues from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Justice will then elaborate on some of the areas.

Madam President,

First of all, I would like to say a few words about our overall human rights policy.

The Government's goal is to ensure Sweden's full respect of our international obligations on human rights.

This was reaffirmed in our national strategy for human rights, which was adopted in 2016 and forms the basis of our systematic work on human rights.

In the last UPR cycle, Sweden accepted recommendations to establish a national human rights institution in accordance with the Paris Principles. This is a matter of high priority for the Swedish Government, and significant steps to comply have been taken.

A ministry inquiry was commissioned to propose how a human rights institution in accordance with the Paris Principles could be modelled. Its report was delivered in October 2018 and circulated for consultation to nearly 200 different bodies. It proposes the establishment of a human rights institution in 2021.

In early 2019, the Prime Minister announced that his Government will establish an independent human rights institution and the matter is now being prepared by the Government Offices.

Secondly, I would like to speak about the importance of respecting the rights of the child.

There is never a second chance to have a happy childhood. The situation for children is sometimes described as a question about the future, but children are important in themselves – here and now, not in some distant future.

The rights of the child must be upheld every day and we, as decision-makers, have an obligation to improve the lives of all children. We also have an obligation to listen to children and make sure that their right to participate and influence is guaranteed.

Last year, we celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child – the most ratified human rights treaty in the world.

Sweden was one of the first countries to ratify the Convention in 1990. It is the cornerstone of Sweden's policy on the rights of the child.

While notable progress has been made in the past three decades, significant challenges still remain, in particular for children in vulnerable situations.

This applies, for example, to children who are at risk of violence, human trafficking or honour-related oppression, or who live in community care.

The Swedish Government will continue to prioritise efforts to combat all forms of violence against children and increased support to children in vulnerable situations.

But despite strategic measures, and the fact that rights of the child have been transformed into applicable Swedish laws and reflected in new legislation, the Convention has not had enough impact on decision-making processes concerning children. Nor have its obligations had enough impact on the activities of central and local government.

Therefore, I am proud to announce that the Convention became Swedish law on the first of January this year. This is a milestone in our national work for the rights of the child.

Incorporation gives the Convention the status of Swedish law, entailing a clearer obligation on courts and legal practitioners to consider the rights contained in the Convention on the rights of the child in deliberations and assessments that are part of decision-making processes in cases and matters concerning children.

If children are to be able to have their rights upheld, it is important that there are systems in place that enable them to assert them. These rights can be

asserted in different ways.

The potential ratification of the Third Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure raises a number of questions which must be analysed before the Government is able to reach a view on the issue.

Madam President,

Thirdly, I would like to address the importance of continued work on effective and comprehensive legislation against discrimination.

Legislative protection against discrimination has been strengthened – for instance regarding accessibility for persons with disabilities – and the budget for anti-discrimination measures has been increased.

An inquiry has been appointed to analyse whether the current provisions regarding supervision of active measures are appropriate for effective compliance with the law.

Not least the #metoo movement shows us that we need to do more.

Madam President,

We also need to fight racism.

Wherever racism exists, and however it is expressed, we must fight it. Racism, xenophobia and prejudice restrict people's lives. They are unacceptable and have no place in a democratic society.

The Swedish Security Service's 2018 Yearbook showed that xenophobic and radical nationalist ideas have increased in society, mainly through social media.

These abhorrent ideas and racist organisations spread hatred towards Jews, Afro-Swedes and Muslims, as well as Sami, Roma, Tornedalers and Swedish Finns.

In our previous UPR dialogue, Sweden received a recommendation to adopt a national action plan against racism. The recommendation was accepted and an integrated, holistic and comprehensive national plan to combat racism, similar forms of hostility and hate crime was subsequently adopted by the Government in 2016. It serves as a foundation for Sweden's work against all

forms and manifestations of racism and hate crime. The plan provides all relevant actors with a common platform and better conditions for working together – so initiatives can be followed up and work developed on a holistic basis.

A range of measures have been implemented and are ongoing. They are being carried out by the Government, and by government agencies on its behalf.

Some examples include:

- racism research grants distributed the Swedish Research Council;
- major educational initiatives on racism, and training for public sector employees, including school staff, police officers and social workers, carried out by the Living History Forum;
- an intensification of measures within the Swedish Police Authority and the judiciary; and
- targeted measures by the Swedish Media Council to empower children and young persons through enhanced knowledge on racism and source criticism.

In addition, since 2018, the Government has provided grants for increased security enhancements for civil society organisations in Sweden. This is because we know that civil society organisations are exposed to racism and hate crime, which can weaken their position and limit their possibilities to raise their voices.

And in the near future, the Government intends to take further action to strengthen the national plan.

Already in the 1980s, Sweden appointed an Ambassador for Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law. Then in 2016, we also appointed a special envoy for intercultural and interfaith dialogue. The role of the special envoy is to liaise with, and coordinate our participation in, international initiatives to tackle the global human rights challenges posed by racism – including antisemitism and Islamophobia – and protect religious minorities.

Madam President,

On 26–27 October 2020 – twenty years after the Stockholm International

Forum on the Holocaust and the establishment of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance – Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven will host heads of state or government, international organisations, experts, and representatives of academia and civil society at the Malmö International Forum on Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Antisemitism.

The main themes of the Forum will be: Holocaust remembrance, Holocaust education, and antisemitism on social media platforms.

With a firm basis in the history of the Holocaust, the Malmö Forum will seek to strengthen international cooperation for Holocaust remembrance and develop new and improved strategies and measures to combat antisemitism and other forms of racism.

Antisemitism and all forms of racism are threats to us all and to our open and democratic societies. Wherever we see antisemitism, and no matter who expresses it, we must act and – with unwavering resoluteness – expose, confront and combat it. We must do so by protecting and promoting democratic values and respect for human rights. One thing is certain: all forms of racism – antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-Gypsyism and Afrophobia to mention a few – are connected. Women, LGBTI persons and persons with disabilities can be particularly vulnerable. We must address antisemitism and all forms of racial discrimination. We can never tolerate it.

Madam President,

I would like to continue by stressing that equal rights and opportunities for LGBTI persons are highly prioritised by the Swedish Government.

Our position is crystal clear: it is not a question of opinion or morals – human rights are universal and apply to all. Everyone must be able to fully enjoy their human rights irrespective of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. It is our duty as states to respect, protect and fulfil these rights for all persons, without discrimination of any kind.

In order to strengthen equal rights for transgender persons we are working to pass modern legislation that allows a change of legal gender on the basis of self-determination. We have encountered some challenges in the legislative process, but we are determined to resolve them.

We will also examine how the Parental Code can be made more gender-neutral. This is important for rainbow-families.

Furthermore, The Swedish Migration Agency has been given several assignments and works continuously to ensure the quality in legal processes involving LGBTI identity or expression, and ensure it has the necessary skills to make assessments in such cases. Persons who risk persecution in their country of origin due to their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression, for example, have the right to protection in Sweden. Sweden will always be a strong and important voice to protect the right to seek asylum and vulnerable groups.

The Government is now intensifying its work on LGBTI equality by launching Sweden's first LGBTI action plan, which will be developed during 2020.

Madam President,

Let me continue by proudly stating that the Sweden has a feminist government and a feminist foreign policy.

Gender equality is central to all government ministers, and to all our priorities – in decision-making and resource allocation processes. The overall goal of Sweden's gender equality policy is for women and men to have the same power to shape society and their own lives. Our most important tool for implementing our feminist policy is gender mainstreaming, where gender-responsive budgeting is an essential component.

An important improvement in our gender equality infrastructure was the establishment in January 2018 of the Swedish Gender Equality Agency. Its task is to contribute to the effective implementation of gender equality policy.

However, much more still remains to be done. Economic gender equality is one of the Government's priorities. Women and men must have the same opportunities and conditions with regard to paid work, which is important for economic independence throughout life.

A key issue for achieving the equal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work between men and women is providing good conditions for gender-equal parenting. Three reserved months that cannot be transferred between two parents have been introduced, one month at a time, in the parental insurance over a period of time (1995, 2002 and 2016). Evaluations show that the reforms have contributed to a more equal distribution of parental allowance between women and men. It is not only better for women, it is

better for men also, who get a closer bond to their child.

Madam President,

The Government has a policy goal that explicitly states that men's violence against women must stop. Women and men, girls and boys, must have the same right to, and opportunity for, bodily integrity.

This violence is a serious violation of human rights that needs to be addressed within all sectors of society.

In 2016, the Government adopted a ten-year cross-sectoral national strategy for preventing and combating men's violence against women and protecting and supporting women and children subjected to violence.

The policy goal and the strategy cover honour-related violence – a collective oppression including harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and child, early and forced marriages, despicable practices we must counter effectively and clearly.

Enhanced and effective violence prevention is crucial in this context. An inquiry has also been commissioned to consider the need for a special crime classification pertaining to honour crimes.

We can never accept when people are being denied the right to decide over their own lives and their own bodies.

Madam President,

Four days ago the Swedish Supreme Court decided that it is not the state but the Girjas sameby (Sami village) alone that has the right to decide on issues relating to fishing and small game hunting on the lands that they have used for reindeer herding since time immemorial. The ruling will be analysed and necessary measures will be taken.

In the 2019 Statement of Government Policy, the Prime Minister set out the Government's commitment to strengthening the self-determination and influence of the indigenous Sami people. The Swedish Government intends to continue and step up its work in the area of policy relating to the Sami people.

There are several important processes currently under way to this end. For example, the introduction of a consultation procedure, a Nordic Sami

Convention, and preservation and revitalisation of the Sami languages.

In connection with this, I would also like to mention that the Sami Parliament has made a request for a Truth Commission and the Tornedaler national minority has made a request for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Swedish Government intends to fulfil both of these requests. Dialogue about the continued process is ongoing.

Madam President,

On the subject of national minorities, I would also like to emphasise that the Government is working for the continued empowerment of national minorities. Ensuring the rights of national minorities, including their full enjoyment of human rights, is a priority that has a particular focus on culture and languages.

The Swedish Government has strengthened legislation to support all our national minorities. One important improvement is the requirement for all municipalities and regions to adopt goals and guidelines for their work on minority policy, of which language and culture should be a key part. A central task for stakeholders working with national minorities is creating conditions that promote the transfer of language and culture from one generation to the next.

Madam President,

Everyone has the right to live their life in freedom and dignity. Despite progress in recent decades, persons with disabilities still tend to be forgotten or overlooked. This is unacceptable. Our societies should be judged on how we treat those who are most vulnerable. Let me therefore also reaffirm that the Swedish Government will continue its work for an effective, systematic and sustainable disability policy.

In 2008, Sweden ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol. And in 2017, we adopted a new national goal for disability policy that uses the Convention as a starting point. A lot of work will be needed in the years ahead, and the Swedish Agency for Participation has the mission to make sure that disability policy has an impact in society. It monitors development, develops methods and guidelines, initiates research, disseminates knowledge and proposes measures to the Government. It is thus one of the Government's most important tools for the implementation of disability policy.

The Government has initiated several processes to strengthen the rights of persons who require personal assistance. But challenges and obstacles still remain, and a lot of work will be needed in the years ahead.

Madam President,

Let me conclude by saying that we are facing uncertain times. Around the world, there is growing pushback against human rights. It is no longer enough to promote human rights – sadly, we must also defend what has already been accomplished. Our message is clear: Sweden is determined to promote and protect human rights – to push back the pushback!

But before I finish, let me say that our work on achieving full respect for human rights in Sweden is far from over, but we will continue working tirelessly to achieve it.

I want to thank you for your attention, and for giving us this opportunity to address the Council. We look forward to hearing the recommendations from the distinguished delegates here today and to participating in the coming dialogue.



Government Offices of Sweden

Speech from Ministry of Employment

Speech by Åsa Lindhagen at the UN Commission on the Status of Women

Published 13 March 2019

New York, March 12, 2019. Check against delivery.

Madame/Mr Chair,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Sweden aligns itself with the statement made on behalf of the European Union. I am honored to lead Sweden's delegation, as a member of a feminist government, and happy that the Swedish delegation includes a variety of expertise from the civil society in Sweden.

Gender equality is a fundamental matter of human rights, democracy and social justice. Women and men must have the same power to shape society and their own lives.

We stand up for the equal rights of all LGBTI-persons. All persons are of equal value, and must be able to enjoy all human rights and share the same responsibilities and opportunities, regardless of sex, gender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation or age.

Madame/Mr Chair,

Sweden welcomes the UN Secretary General's report on the need for well-designed and integrated social protection systems, public services and sustainable infrastructure that can advance gender equality.

The pursuit for gender equality has been a guiding principle in developing the Swedish welfare state. Individual taxation, child care and the right to

paid parental leave, combined with access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, are key reforms in improving women's earnings, well-being and the equality at home.

But still, even with significant progress, gender gaps remain in Sweden. Women earn lower wages and take a greater responsibility for the unpaid work at home. Women are physically and sexually abused also in my country. We have not completed our work in Sweden. We have a lot more to do.

Madame/Mr Chair,

Around the world, democracy is in decline. Journalists, elected representatives and human rights defenders are being harassed, persecuted and even killed. Women are being suppressed and their human rights neglected. Civil society organizations representing LGBTI-rights, are under attack. This is a threat to democracy and unacceptable.

In response to this, Sweden is now launching a drive for democracy. Fully functioning democracy is impossible without the promotion and protection of human rights. All states have an unquestionable responsibility to fulfill these rights. Sweden is committed to this.

An important part of our democracy drive is to continue pursuing a feminist foreign policy.

We will continue our extensive support to sexual and reproductive health and rights. For example, Sweden is funding initiatives for contraceptives, safe and legal abortions and comprehensive sexuality education. We will work against trafficking in human beings and share our experience of the Swedish Sexual Purchases Act, which prohibits the purchase of sexual services.

We will share information on our new sexual offence legislation based on consent and the obvious notion that if sex is not voluntary it is illegal. Stopping men's violence against women is a priority for my government. We are also happy that the Forum on Gender Equality held in Stockholm last year, will be followed up in Tunis in April this year.

Madame/Mr Chair,

Our times are troubling times. There is a cold wind blowing over parts of the world. Destructive forces are pushing to roll back many land-winnings on

gender equality. Climate change is threatening our civilization and the rights for women and girls. New voices are being raised questioning the importance of gender equality.

Therefore, it is urgent and utterly important that we stand up for the equal value of all people and for the rights of women and girls. In these times it is no longer enough to push gender equality forward, we must now also defend what has already been accomplished. The message from Sweden is clear: gender equality must move forward, not be rolled back.

Thank you.