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A Stain on Sweden's History: Compulsory Sterilization and the Eradication of Misfits

ABSTRACT: *This essay analyzes the rationale behind compulsory sterilization in Sweden. Sweden was the first country to design and promote a eugenics program, which resulted in the mandatory sterilization of particular social groups, such as Finns, Sámi, Jews, Romani, and the disabled. From the 1930s to the late 1970s, Sweden forcibly sterilized approximately 60,000 women under the 1935 Sterilization Act with the goal of building a pure Sweden – a nation of Nordic, able-bodied, and heterosexual individuals.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; Sweden; sterilization; women; Finns; Sámi; Jews; Romani; disabled; Nordicism*

Introduction

According to travel magazines and news reports, Sweden is one of the best countries in the world. They describe Sweden as “an outstanding place to live” that puts its focus on improving “environmental issues, civic engagement, education, health and well-being, personal safety, and having a good work-life balance.”¹ Yet, while the Swedish government continues to emphasize these civic ideals in the twenty-first century, Sweden—like many colonial powers—has a stain on its history that has been largely kept from the world.

Sweden’s ties to eugenics and state practices that targeted persons judged aberrant and unsuitable for reproducing have remained a stain on the country’s history. The study of eugenics and the emphasis on producing a pure Nordic nation first took root in the early twentieth century. In 1909, the Swedish Society for Racial Hygiene was founded with the purpose of influencing “public policy as well as public opinion by spreading knowledge about eugenic methods and results.”² The Swedish Society for Racial Hygiene paved the way for the State Institute for Racial Biology, a government-funded eugenics institute that was the first of its kind.

Founded in the 1920s, this State Institute divided the Swedish people (Nordic, Finns, Sámi, Romani, etc.) on the basis of racial criteria to secure the livelihood and lineage of the Nordic (Swedish) race.³ The State Institute and the Swedish government alike sought to promote both “positive” and “negative” measures.⁴ The “positive” measures aimed to boost the Nordic population, while the “negative” ones aimed to prevent the “other” populations (Finns, Sámi, Romani,

¹ Gizane Campos, “Sweden Ranks as the Best Country for Quality of Life,” Global Citizen Solutions, [online](#).

² Maria Björkman and Sven Widmalm, “Selling Eugenics: The Case of Sweden,” *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 64, no. 4 (December 2010): 381.

³ Ulrika Kjellman, “A Whiter Shade of Pale: Visuality and Race in the Work of the Swedish State Institute for Race Biology,” *Scandinavian Journal of History* 38, no. 2 (2013): 180–201.

⁴ Björkman and Widmalm, “Selling Eugenics,” 382.

etc.) from growing. "Sterilization was put forth as a superior tool to achieve the latter goal,"⁵ and in the 1930s, the Swedish government passed a law that legitimized the sterilization of those deemed deviants and a burden to the nation.

The aim of this essay is to examine the motivations behind the compulsory sterilization of minority women in Sweden. From the 1930s to the late 1970s, Sweden sterilized approximately 60,000 women under the Sterilization Act, which was approved in 1935 and further expanded in 1941. Sweden sterilized these women due to the implementation of a racial biology-based hierarchy, the desire to eliminate the economic burden of caring for those deemed unfit, and the failure—until 1974—to enact a modern Constitution that prohibited all forms of racial and gender discrimination.

I. Historiography

Sweden was the first country to develop and support a eugenics program, which resulted in regulations that advocated the mandatory sterilization of certain groups. These regulations were enacted in an attempt to manage the intended population while paving the path for the eugenics movement. From the 1930s to the late 1970s, Sweden forcibly sterilized women to build a nation that they thought was "pure," namely, made up of Nordic, able-bodied, and heterosexual individuals.⁶ Swedish officials targeted minorities and people deemed impure or a burden on the nation. The 1935 Sterilization Act would forever deprive these women of the opportunity to bear children. Recently, more and more scholars have written about the eugenics movement in Sweden and have examined the motivations behind it.

Some of them, like the Canadian historian of medicine Paul Weindling, study how the eugenics movement spread throughout Europe and how eugenics became a global concept among public health experts, welfare reformers, and organizations concerned with the biological basis of race and sexuality.⁷ Swedish historian of science Gunnar Broberg and Norwegian historical theorist Nils Roll-Hansen use quantitative and qualitative data to determine what led to the creation of mass sterilization programs in Scandinavian countries (i.e., Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland), claiming that it was thought to be done for the "betterment of society."⁸ These and other authors investigate the history, politics, science, and economics that led to the development of the Sterilization Act, providing relevant and vital information on compulsory sterilization. When

⁵ Björkman and Widmalm, "Selling Eugenics," 382.

⁶ Marius Turda, review of *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland*, ed. Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 81, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 894–895.

⁷ Paul Weindling, "International Eugenics: Swedish Sterilization in Context," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 24, no. 2 (1999): 179–197.

⁸ Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen, eds., *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996).

looking at the development of Swedish eugenics, specifically the formation of the Swedish State Institute for Racial Biology, the work of Swedish historians Maria Björkman and Sven Widmalm are vital. Björkman and Widmalm provide a unique perspective as they explore the viewpoints of eugenic academics and scientists, whose key issue in the early twentieth century was the selling of eugenics. This argument is key as it presents the various networks and individuals that made the Sterilization Act possible.⁹

With regard to race-based sterilization, studies offer a considerable range of differing perspectives. John Rogers and Marie C. Nelson, both affiliated with Swedish universities, examine the qualitative and quantitative data used to categorize racial groups living in Sweden. Their main point is to demonstrate how this racial hierarchy was utilized to label certain groups as deficient.¹⁰ According to Rogers and Nelson, “the aim of the modern Swedish state during this period was to improve the racial qualities of the Swedish ‘race’ by eliminating undesirable elements.”¹¹ British scholar Sarah Ramsay’s work is based on a government commission report on the targeted sterilization of specific communities.¹² Ramsay analyzes how the application of the Sterilization Act changed from 1935 until 1975, finding that, according to the government commission, “opinion was united in favor of the legislation when it was in effect.”¹³ Meanwhile, historian of medicine Terry-Lee Marttinen examines how the Sámi were targets of race-based sterilization. Marttinen discusses the history of eugenics in Sweden, including the use of racial biology.¹⁴

There is an array of those who have written on the Swedish Sterilization Act and racial biology. Susan Danielsson, a scholar affiliated with the American Military University, examines the Swedish State Institute for Racial Biology, which led to the formation of a racial hierarchy in Sweden:¹⁵ eugenicists used their “findings” and “the support of political parties and the social elite to promote and incorporate their ideologies into social policy.”¹⁶ The Swedish Sterilization Act targeted Sámi, Finns, Jews, Romani, and the disabled. Danielsson discusses the impact that the Swedish Sterilization Act and the eugenics movement have had on

⁹ Björkman and Widmalm, “Selling Eugenics,” 379–400.

¹⁰ John Rogers and Marie C. Nelson, “‘Lapps, Finns, Gypsies, Jews, and Idiots?’ Modernity and the Use of Statistical Categories in Sweden,” *Annales de Démographie Historique* 105, no. 1 (2003): 61.

¹¹ Rogers and Nelson, “Lapps, Finns, Gypsies, Jews, and Idiots,” 72.

¹² Sarah Ramsay, “Enforced Sterilisations in Sweden Confirmed,” *The Lancet* 355, no. 9211 (2000): 1252.

¹³ Ramsay, “Enforced Sterilisations,” 1252.

¹⁴ Terry-Lee Marttinen, “Eugenics, Admixture, and Multiculturalism in Twentieth-Century Northern Sweden: Contesting Disability and Sámi Genocide,” *Journal of Critical Mixed-Race Studies* 1, no. 2 (2022): 233–261.

¹⁵ Susan Danielsson, “Not Fit to Breed: Eugenics in Sweden, 1900 to Present,” *Saber and Scroll* 9, no. 1 (2020): 49–67.

¹⁶ Danielsson, “Not Fit to Breed,” 51.

the nation, as “the Swedish government could face thousands of legal claims for compensation.”¹⁷ Researcher Declan Butler’s work scrutinizes the silence of Swedish scientists and the failure of the medical community.¹⁸ Butler dissects racial biology in Sweden, referencing the expanded Swedish Sterilization Act of 1941 and medical genetics in Sweden, specifically in the 1950s. The perspective of the victims is a crucial part of his work, as he discusses how the Swedish Sterilization Act was eventually abolished with the help of protests from victims.

Scholars such as Alberto Spektorowski, Elisabet Mizrachi, Torbjörn Tännsjö, and Niels Lynöe offer additional perspectives. Israeli political scientists Alberto Spektorowski and Elisabet Mizrachi investigate the motivation for sterilization, discovering an exclusionist vision of social welfare and a desire for a healthy society as the driving forces.¹⁹ Swedish philosopher Torbjörn Tännsjö takes a different approach as he looks at how the Swedish sterilization effort targeted people based on their race and ability.²⁰ Meanwhile, Niels Lynöe, a Swedish scholar of medical ethics, examines why half of the women who were sterilized were apparently not pressured. Lynöe analyzes how, despite the fact that the Swedish Sterilization Act emerged out of the eugenics movement, those who were sterilized did so for a variety of reasons.²¹

II. The Formation of a Racial Hierarchy

From the 1930s to the late 1970s, Sweden forcibly sterilized approximately 60,000 women based on the idea of a racial biology-based hierarchy. The Sterilization Act was introduced as a “way of changing society for the better.”²² At the turn of the twentieth century, racial biology thrived in scientific, medical, and academic settings across Europe, as eugenicists sought to make their respective race(s) superior to all others. Swedish eugenicists and their supporters viewed sterilization as a “human solution.”²³

As indicated earlier, the Swedish State Institute for Racial Biology was the first of its kind and propelled Sweden into the eugenics movement. Herman Lundborg (1868–1943), the State Institute’s director, and other Swedish eugenicists “sought to improve the superior Swedish race through eugenic social policies that helped

¹⁷ Danielsson, “Not Fit to Breed,” 51.

¹⁸ Declan Butler, “Eugenics Scandal Reveals Silence of Swedish Scientists,” *Nature* 389, no. 6646 (1997): 9.

¹⁹ Alberto Spektorowski and Elisabet Mizrachi, “Eugenics and the Welfare State in Sweden: The Politics of Social Margins and the Idea of a Productive Society,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 3 (2004): 333–352.

²⁰ Torbjörn Tännsjö, “Compulsory Sterilisation in Sweden,” *Bioethics* 12, no. 3 (1998): 236–249.

²¹ Niels Lynöe, “Race Enhancement Through Sterilization: Swedish Experiences,” *International Journal of Mental Health* 36, no. 1 (2007): 17–25.

²² Butler, “Eugenics Scandal,” 9.

²³ Butler, “Eugenics Scandal,” 9.

prevent inferior individuals from procreating with those deemed superior."²⁴ Eugenacists aimed for racial purity, which they felt could only be found in the Nordic (Swedish) population. Now, historically, the Indigenous population known as the Sámi should be referred to as Swedes; however, eugenacists "excluded this minority group."²⁵ Swedish eugenacists produced a racial hierarchy supported by scientific racism and nationalistic ideologies. Using physical and national traits, they identified who and what the ideal Swede was and should be.

Swedish eugenacists used human data and experimentation to define these characteristics and establish a hierarchy: "A vast amount of bodily data was therefore collected – bodies, skulls, and face angles were measured, and hair and eye colors determined, to decide what race a person belonged to."²⁶ Separating the population into Nordic, Sámi, Finns, mixed-race (Romani), and others, they claimed that the Nordic (Swedish) race descended from "the ancient Germanic peoples, and their blood connection ensured they inherited numerous 'positive' characteristics."²⁷ Lundborg described racially pure Swedes as strong, fair-skinned, with fair hair and short, straight noses. He even noted their characteristics as "heroic, courageous, hardworking, compassionate, and hospitable, especially toward strangers."²⁸ Racially pure Swedes were considered well-educated and industrious, unlike their counterparts, who were anything but that. Swedish eugenacists used "positive" measures aimed at ensuring that racially pure individuals procreated within their own population and therefore increased the superior Nordic race. They also used "negative" measures aimed at preventing the non-Swedish populations from reproducing.

The groups that were seen as "inferior" and targeted for the implementation of "negative" measures (i.e., sterilization) included the Finns, Sámi, Jews, and Romani. The goal was to eliminate these groups and ensure that they could not infect the Nordic race.²⁹ Swedish eugenacists condemned these groups and saw them as racial threats and poisons.³⁰ The Swedish adopted policies that allowed for the sterilization of these groups, "even if they did not agree to the procedure."³¹ These laws were in effect until 1975.

²⁴ Danielsson, "Not Fit to Breed," 53.

²⁵ Danielsson, "Not Fit to Breed," 54.

²⁶ Kjellman, "Whiter Shade of Pale," 180–201.

²⁷ Danielsson, "Not Fit to Breed," 54.

²⁸ Danielsson, "Not Fit to Breed," 54.

²⁹ Rogers and Nelson, "Lapps, Finns, Gypsies, Jews, and Idiots," 61–79.

³⁰ Danielsson, "Not Fit to Breed," 54.

³¹ Rogers and Nelson, "Lapps, Finns, Gypsies, Jews, and Idiots," 74.

III. Protecting the Welfare State

Sweden sterilized women due to a desire to eliminate the economic burden of caring for those deemed unfit. The majority of the Nordic (Swedish) public eventually accepted sterilization after witnessing its use for “eugenic (relating to ‘racial cleanliness’ or ‘genetic purity’), social, and medical” objectives.³² Despite the fact that Sweden was the first country to establish a State Institute for Racial Biology and relied on it throughout the eugenics movement, the reasoning for compulsory sterilization shifted from racialization to economic needs.³³

The Nordic population supported sterilization because they did not want the economic burden of caring for misfits. Ultimately viewing it as eugenic socialism, the Swedish sought to “engineer a welfare community for ‘the fittest’ or a ‘welfare eugenics,’ built on parameters of ‘right-living’ destined to exclude those defined as non-productive.”³⁴ Swedish government officials modified the Sterilization Act with the goal of not just improving the Nordic race but also ensuring the welfare state’s security.³⁵ Swedes were consumed by Nordicism and nationalism as they sought to exclude entire groups based on biological and social classifications: “[w]hen eugenics became the basis of social engineering, it broadened the scope of those destined to be ‘excluded.’”³⁶ Sterilization was not only determined by race but also by economic productivity. Therefore, women who were seen as “economically dependent and lower-class”³⁷ were sterilized.

Forced sterilization targeted Finns, Sámi, Jews, Romani, and the disabled because certain personal qualities and illnesses were viewed as hereditary and tied to these specific groups. Supporters of sterilization argued that the “miserable conditions of urban slums were a direct result of the genetic inefficiencies of the slums’ inhabitants, rather than a product of social structures.”³⁸ Swedish officials highlighted the large costs incurred by non-Swedish groups, labeling them as deviants and unsuitable. This became a key component of the eugenics push.³⁹ The survival of the Swedish welfare state was used to excuse forced sterilizations, as certain groups were viewed as threats and incompetent. Sterilization policies reflected the demands and desires of the state while entirely disregarding the individual rights of its people.

³² Ramsay, “Enforced Sterilisations,” 1252.

³³ Butler, “Eugenics Scandal,” 9.

³⁴ Spektorowski and Mizrachi, “Eugenics,” 334.

³⁵ Danielsson, “Not Fit to Breed,” 49.

³⁶ Spektorowski and Mizrachi, “Eugenics,” 337.

³⁷ Yağmur Yılmaz, “Eugenics and Bodily Discipline in the Scandinavian Welfare State” (master’s thesis, Lund University, 2019), 11.

³⁸ Spektorowski and Mizrachi, “Eugenics,” 335.

³⁹ Danielsson, “Not Fit to Breed,” 62.

IV. The Declaration of Human Rights

Sweden sterilized approximately 60,000 women due to its failure to enact a modern Constitution that prohibited all forms of racial and gender discrimination until 1974. The Swedish Sterilization Act was repealed in 1975, partly as a result of protests by sterilization victims during the 1960s women's movement and partly as a result of the United Nations' anti-discriminatory advances, which contributed to the modernization of the Swedish constitution.

The Swedish Sterilization Act was in effect from 1935 to 1975, and it targeted women from marginalized communities. These women had been "branded as superfluous, 'undeserving' citizens" despite having Swedish citizenship.⁴⁰ From the perspective of the United Nations (admittedly founded ten years after the passage of the Swedish Sterilization Act), Swedish law endorsed the "violation of international human rights,"⁴¹ as compulsory sterilization was a violation of the "right to health; the right to information; the right to liberty and security of the person; the right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment; and the right to be free from discrimination and equality."⁴² These discriminatory practices denied certain women and their communities—Finns, Sámi, Jews, Romani, and the disabled—fundamental rights. They denied them the right to motherhood "due to a perception that they [were] less than ideal members of society."⁴³

Swedish officials and courts had viewed compulsory sterilization as a necessary evil for the welfare of society and the well-being of women from populations deemed unfit. The failure of Sweden to recognize the crimes against humanity committed during the eugenics movement demonstrated the public's reliance on white supremacy and racial nationalism. Fortunately, in the 1960s and 1970s, the second wave of feminism broke through, focusing on "equity and discrimination."⁴⁴

As early as 1953, the European Convention for Human Rights had taken a clear position against many forms of discrimination.⁴⁵ The United Nations' "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination" was adopted in 1965 (and entered into force in 1969); it affirmed "that any doctrine of superiority based on racial differentiation is scientifically false, morally condemnable, socially unjust and dangerous, and that there is no justification for

⁴⁰ Yilmaz, "Eugenics," 11.

⁴¹ Priti Patel, "Forced Sterilization of Women as Discrimination," *Public Health Reviews* 38, no. 1 (2017): 4.

⁴² Patel, "Forced Sterilization," 4.

⁴³ Patel, "Forced Sterilization," 9.

⁴⁴ *Bloomington Women's Liberation Front Newsletter*, October 13, 1970, Gale Primary Sources, Women's Studies Archive, database.

⁴⁵ Jessica Sandberg, "Human Rights in Sweden," *Revista IIDH* 36, no. 1 (2002): 107–127.

racial discrimination, in theory, or in practice, anywhere.”⁴⁶ The United Nations’ “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women” was adopted in 1979 (and entered into force in 1981); it emphasized that gender discrimination “violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity.”⁴⁷ Thus, the international community’s stance against racial and gender discrimination aided and is reflected in the modernization of the Swedish Constitution in 1974 and the annulment of the Swedish Sterilization Act in 1975.

Conclusion

From the 1930s to the late 1970s, Sweden sterilized approximately 60,000 women under the Sterilization Act due to the implementation of a racial biology-based hierarchy, the desire to eliminate the economic burden of caring for those deemed unfit, and the failure – until 1974 – to enact a modern Constitution that prohibited all forms of racial and gender discrimination. Sweden participated in the compulsory sterilization of women due to ethnocentric and white nationalist – Nordicist – sentiments. The women sterilized during this period were stripped of their human rights and of the choice of motherhood. They were sterilized on the grounds of eugenics, social, and medical ideologies, “even if they did not agree to the procedure.”⁴⁸ Sweden targeted Finns, Sámi, Romani, and Jews as they were viewed as racially inferior. The government was additionally concerned about genetic illnesses and believed that women with disabilities were unable to truly mother their infants. The desire to secure “the homogeneity of the Swedish people”⁴⁹ led to the rejection of these entire groups and, ultimately, to their sterilization.

After years of pressure from these various groups, protests held during the 1960s and 1970s second-wave feminist movement, as well as the United Nations’ anti-discriminatory advances, Sweden finally realized the errors it had made. In 1975, Sweden stopped the compulsory sterilization of Finns, Sámi, Romani, Jewish, and disabled women. However, Sweden soon targeted a new group, namely, individuals from the LGBTQ+ community. Between 1973 and 2013, Sweden forced transgender individuals to be sterilized while undergoing gender-change surgery.⁵⁰

For years, individuals in Sweden were silenced, kept in the dark, and severely impacted by the atrocities of the eugenics movement, and the country’s troubled past has remained obscured by nationalistic beliefs. Yet, despite attempts by the

⁴⁶ U.N. General Assembly, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (December 21, 1965), [online](#).

⁴⁷ U.N. General Assembly, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women New York (December 18, 1979), [online](#).

⁴⁸ Rogers and Nelson, “Lapps, Finns, Gypsies, Jews, and Idiots,” 74.

⁴⁹ Rogers and Nelson, “Lapps, Finns, Gypsies, Jews, and Idiots,” 69.

⁵⁰ Johan Ahlander, “Sweden to Offer Compensation for Transgender Sterilizations,” *Reuters*, March 27, 2017, [online](#).

Swedish government to suppress history, the truth is emerging. Consequently, the Swedish government has decided to compensate everyone who was sterilized for the suffering and mistreatment they had to endure.⁵¹ But the psychological and emotional effects these people experienced will always remain with them.

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⁵¹ Danielsson, "Not Fit to Breed," 62; Ahlander, "Sweden to Offer Compensation," [online](#).