

## **Call for input UN Special rapporteur VAWAG – violence against mothers**

The Swedish Women's Lobby is a politically and religiously independent umbrella organization for the Swedish women's movement. We bring together 58 associations that together represent over 130 000 women and girls. We work for the liberation of women and girls, their full human rights, and a gender equal society. This input has been written by Astrid Carsbring, expert on men's violence against women at the SWL, Sofija Djenadija at the SWL and Susannah Sjöberg, Secretary General at the SWL.

### **1.1. Manifestations, causes and perpetrators of violence**

#### **1.1.1. What are some of the most prominent forms of violence and extreme discrimination to which women are subjected because of their status as mothers?**

**E.g. Economic psychological, physical and reproductive violence.**

#### **1.1.2. Is there a correlation between femicide and intimate partner violence and women's status as mothers?**

There is a clear correlation between pregnancy and an increased risk of being exposed to men's violence. A Swedish study found that violence increases as pregnancies progresses, from 1 percent reporting violence in the early stages of pregnancy to 3,3 percent reporting violence 1,5 years postpartum. The risk of violence during pregnancy doubled when the woman was close to the end of the pregnancy.<sup>1</sup> This indicates that when the window of possibility of abortion is closed, it is more common for violence to occur.

According to a 2014 survey study by The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (BRÅ) approximately one third of women exposed to violence have children living in their household. At the population level, this corresponds to almost 83,000 women and 83,000 children. Though, BRÅ holds reservation for an underreporting of these numbers.<sup>2</sup> A more recent survey study by the National Organization for Women's shelters and Girl's shelters in Sweden (Roks), showed that 63 percent of women

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<sup>1</sup> [Ökat våld under graviditeten | Vårdfokus](#)

<sup>2</sup> [2014\\_8\\_Brott\\_i\\_nara\\_relationer.pdf](#)

exposed to violence from a previous male partner have a child with the perpetrator.<sup>3</sup> The exposure of children to violence in the home is directly related to trauma in the brain. In 2021, a specific criminal offence concerning child abuse (the child peace offence) was introduced in Sweden. The legislative change makes it a criminal act to subject a child to witnessing acts of violence or sexual offences in close relationships.

One in ten children (more than 200,000 children) in Sweden have experienced violence in the family. Living with violence or threats of violence against the mother is a form of psychological violence against the child. This increases the risk of a lower quality of life, poorer school performance, and problems such as mental illness, trauma, anxiety, externalizing behaviour, and self-harm. Therefore, it is important to protect and support these children and their mothers.<sup>4</sup>

The risk of experiencing economic abuse increases significantly after motherhood. A Swedish study found that motherhood is the single most differentiating variable and risk factor for economic abuse, and with economic exploitation being the most common and increasing form of economic violence after motherhood.<sup>5</sup>

### **1.1.3. What is the linkage between violence against mothers and violence against their children, including girls—and vice versa?**

In Sweden, the situation for mothers who experience abuse is alarming. The law resides upon an assumption that parents (in practice, fathers) have a right to be in their child's life, and that children's lives are better off with both parents rather than just one. This creates an avoidance towards granting one parent full custody, and leads to shared custody, consensus solutions, or supervised visitations.

It is common for men to exploit joint children as means of power in judicial processes. Violence is manifested through custodial disputes and a variety of threats concerning the child or the mother to maintain control over the woman's life. It is common for perpetrators to commit violence towards both mothers and children during visitation, or to ask the children about their new home address (fathers often get visitation rights even if the mother has been granted protected address and personal information). Women are being accused of visitation sabotage when calling out fathers' violence in efforts of protecting their children. If a mother is accused of sabotaging visitation, she must pay a fine of thousands of SEK for each 'sabotaged' visit – and since visitation often is weekly, this can amount to a large sum of money for the mother. It can also lead to her losing custody of the children.

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<sup>3</sup> [Roks-rapport-2022\\_webb-enkelsid\\_1.pdf](#)

<sup>4</sup> Swedish association of local authorities and regions: [Barn och våld - SKR](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Men's Economic Abuse Toward Women in Sweden: Findings From a National Survey](#)

The Swedish laws on custody rests upon a presumption about shared custody which centers around voluntary collaboration. If a woman asserts her rights to full custody of her child because of violence, it creates a disadvantage to her case if she opposes collaboration and visitational rights of the father. It becomes more damaging to the custody case for the mother to refuse collaboration than for the father to have been abusive towards the mother. This is because the judicial branch puts more emphasis on whether parents can cooperate, often leading to the refusing parent not being heard on causes for refusal. Violence within the relationship becomes a secondary question to custody, not acknowledging the intersection between mothers who want to protect their children and fathers who are granted an advantage in his abuse.<sup>6</sup>

Even when children show and speak of great fear of their father, there are an overwhelming amount of cases where children are forced to have visitation with him. This is established either through a judicial decision or through parental agreements. A survey study on young adults with a history of growing up with a violent parent showed that out of the 77 respondents, almost half of them claimed to have told an adult that they did not want to spend time with the parent they had forced visitation with. Furthermore, 50 percent of the respondents who had experienced forced visitation by court ruling claimed they only met with the parent to protect the other parent.<sup>7</sup> In Sweden, it can be extremely damaging for mothers to appear as non-collaborative in contact with Swedish institutions, courts and agencies.

Women's organizations in Sweden have repeatedly brought up how fathers' rights and perspectives are prioritized over the rights and safety of the children and mothers. In a study by ROKS, they found that in only 2 out of 34 custody cases, the mother got full custody. In the remaining cases, the father had either shared custody or visitational rights. These court decisions were made even in cases involving allegations of abuse and sexual violence affecting the mother, the child, or intersecting harms affecting both. In one case, the court granted visitation for a father who had previously been convicted of multiple violent crimes, as well as being accused of violence towards the mother. The court ruling went against the recommendations by the social services, accusing them of being biased against the father.<sup>8</sup>

This is a dark part of Swedish society that has to be acknowledged, that fathers' rights are prioritized over the rights of the children and mothers. In 2024 an 8-year old boy was murdered by his father during a visitation, the boy had repeatedly told social services and the court how he was scared of his father and still the court ruled that the father had visitation rights. The boy was found dead at the father's house and the father was convicted to prison.<sup>9</sup> This murder started an important public debate in Sweden about

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<sup>6</sup> ROKS, Våld och vårdnad

<sup>7</sup> [unizon-rapport-umgange-2022.pdf](#)

<sup>8</sup> ROKS, Våld och vårdnad

<sup>9</sup> [Tintin, 8, hittades död – pappan döms till livstids fängelse | Göteborgs-Posten](#)

children's right to not have visitation with dangerous and violent fathers. Still there are fathers in Sweden that have murdered their children's mothers who have custody over the children.

Also, a recent study by the Swedish Gender Equality Agency (Jämställdsmyndigheten) observed that cases of men's violence against women was present in 67 percent of the 198 custody cases studied, and that an overwhelming majority of these counts were when the father had been abusive towards the mother. Accusations of violence in custody cases were investigated to a very low extent. In so little as 69 percent of cases the court made a risk assessment of the claims of violence. In only 26 percent of cases where violence towards a parent was deemed a risk and only 32 percent counts of violence against children was considered a risk.<sup>10</sup>

In conclusion, Swedish custody practices continue to prioritise fathers' rights over the safety of women and children. In its latest report, GREVIO urges Sweden to review the granting of custody and visitation to parents—predominantly fathers—with current or past allegations of abuse. GREVIO also calls on courts to give greater weight to social services' assessments, to properly consider power dynamics in abusive relationships, and to take children's expressed fears seriously. Sweden is urged to ensure that children's safety is central in all custody and risk-assessment decisions.

Criminal cases of violence claimed by women are negatively affected by an ongoing custodial conflict. Reports of court cases have shown that when processing a suit of domestic violence simultaneously to a custodial dispute, the court is hesitant towards women's testimony as they deem there is a risk that the suit is connected to her claim of full custody.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, women may have to choose between reporting the father of assault and fighting for custody and safety of their child, as reporting them both at the same time has a negative effect for her on both cases – even though it clearly should be the other way around. Mothers reporting violence and trying to protect their children are often seen as “difficult”, “non-collaborative” and enforces the myth that women lie about men's violence to get full custody. The Swedish Women's Lobby is also frequently contacted by women that witness or experience this and plead for help.

The Swedish women's rights movement has observed a concerning increase in the use of so-called Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) by fathers to defend custodial claims, often prioritizing fathers' rights over the testimonies of women and children. GREVIO has highlighted this practice, noting its lack of scientific basis, and urges Sweden to inform all decision-making bodies accordingly and to phase out PAS and similar concepts.

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<sup>10</sup> [Rapport 2022:1 Uppgifter om våld är inget undantag – Redovisning av kartläggning av uppgifter om våld eller andra övergrepp i mål om vårdnad, boende och umgänge](#)

<sup>11</sup> ROKS, Våld och Vårdnad

### **1.1.5. Who are the perpetrators of violence against mothers, and under what circumstances enable these perpetrators to inflict such violence? Are there patterns of institutional complicity or impunity?**

As of 2024, Swedish law recognises children as independent rights-holders when mothers seek shelter from violent men. The intention was to strengthen children's protection in cases of parental abuse. However, implementation failures have led authorities to separate mothers and children when granting sheltered housing.

Women's organisations report that social services often treat shelter for the mother alone as sufficient, effectively framing her as the sole target of violence while failing to recognise the father as a perpetrator from whom children also need protection. This practice leaves children without adequate safeguards, increases the risk of continued abuse through the children, and discourages mothers from seeking shelter. Given the well-established link between witnessing domestic violence and childhood trauma, this approach puts both women and children at serious risk.

GREVIO has remarked on the reoccurring issue of courts ignoring allegations of the father's abuse in custody cases, leaving abusive fathers with legal momentum regarding increased rights to guardianship. 14 percent of women who have children with their former violent husband or partner report that he subjected them to threats, physical violence or sexual abuse in connection with contact after separation.

In conclusion, legal processes in Sweden allow fathers to maintain control of women through their joint children.

A study of 12 Swedish women who had reported negative birthing experiences identified four different subcategories to obstetric violence – *lack of information, insufficient pain relief, lack of trust and security* and *experience of abuse*. The main findings included counts of inhumane treatment and women feeling their desires and voices not being heard during their delivery. The study constitutes important conclusions of the invisibility of obstetric violence as a form of violence against women, in addition to a systematic disregard of women's health. It aligns with previous literature that states that previous exposure of violence accounts for a particular vulnerability for women during childbirth.<sup>12</sup>

## **1.2. Groups of women and girls particularly affected**

*1.2.1. Which groups of mothers are particularly affected by extreme forms of discrimination and violence, and what are the principal challenges and forms of violence they face?*

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<sup>12</sup> [Obstetric violence a qualitative interview study](#)

It is important to state that all mothers can be affected by different forms of discrimination and violence. However, a study on the experiences of housing support via social services showed that single mothers with a migrant background are a particularly vulnerable group when it comes to homelessness. The interview study conducted shows that the mothers have been subjected to indirect or direct racism and that the fact that they are single mothers has negatively affected their treatment. Another contributing factor are language barriers which led to them not receiving the support they needed.

Furthermore, several of the women in the study also talk about how staff have threatened to take their children into care due to their insecure housing situation, while social services have been unable to help find long-term housing.<sup>13</sup>

The Swedish Women's Lobby also recently released a report on how women experience racism differently to men which among other things showed that mothers with a foreign background face a higher risk of discrimination in social insurance cases. They are more often singled out for alleged benefit fraud and are overrepresented among the homeless.<sup>14</sup> Another factor to consider are women that are subjected to honour based oppression and violence, often controlled by the collective group.

*1.2.2. Are any groups of mothers particularly vulnerable to violence, exploitation or abuse on the intersection of their status as mothers intersecting with other grounds?*

### **3.3. Targeted Policies**

*3.3.1. How do social-protection systems (e.g. cash transfers, family benefits, pensions) include or exclude mothers?*

Single mothers are one of Sweden's most socially and economically exposed groups. 73 percent of all single parents are women (2025) and policy changes over the years have further exacerbated their situations. In 2023, there were 222,250 single women with children under the age of 19, and 33.3 percent had a low economic standard, which makes this a large and economically vulnerable group.<sup>15</sup> Single mothers had 76 percent of single fathers' individual disposable income in 2023 which represents an income gap of 24 percent. Single mothers with a foreign background have particularly low incomes, with their disposable income being approximately 80 percent of the corresponding group of Swedish women. Compared to Swedish single fathers, their income amounts to just under 60 percent.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> [Microsoft Word - SG MAC3.doc](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Rapport: Kvinnors erfarenhet av rasism i Sverige | Sveriges Kvinnoorganisationer](#)

<sup>15</sup> [WEB\\_Finans-och-penningpolitikens-paverkan-2025.pdf](#)

<sup>16</sup> [rapport-2025-17-ett-inneboende-jamstalldhetsproblem-2025-05-28](#)

A recent report further revealed that the Swedish Social Insurance Agency uses an AI-based system for assessing benefits, which disproportionately flags mothers and people with foreign backgrounds for suspected fraud.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, there is a substantial motherhood penalty regarding wages, pensions, working hours, manager positions and employment. The Swedish pension system does not consider that women are more likely to take out more parental leave days, stay at home with a sick child or unwillingly take a part-time job to be able to take care of their children. This results in the biggest pension gap among the Nordic countries, where women's pensions make up only 70 percent of men's.

### *3.3.2. What are the responsibilities of State and non-State actors in preventing acts of violence against mothers, including in the area of business and human rights?*

Despite mothers' particularly vulnerable situations, there is a limited amount of research on this subject. It becomes apparent that mothers are not seen as a vulnerable group in literature and that there could exist an assumption that they face no discrimination or systematic oppression in their roles as mothers.

When Swedish policies or official documents list vulnerable groups of women, they often list elderly women, young girls, immigrant/minority women, and LGBTQ people – but not mothers.

## **Conclusion**

The Swedish Women's Lobby would like to draw attention to the urgent matter of lack of funding for women's rights organizations in Sweden. In Sweden, that has been a strong voice for women's rights in the world so many years, the status of women, including mothers, in society is being weakened. Organizations that advocate for women are facing economic constraints, which in turn undermines their capacity to protect and advance mothers' rights and protect them from violence. This coincides with a development and increase of gender-blind language in our different institutions. Not only do we have to spend time searching for funding, but we also have to spend time fighting the erosion of women in legislation.

The Swedish women's movement is a prerequisite for women's and girls' ability to shape their own lives and a vital actor in ensuring the full realization of women's and girls' human rights. We have contributed to Sweden being one of the least gender-unequal countries in the world, and in a time of backlash, our work is needed more than ever.

A well-resourced women's movement is not only essential for us to be able to operate and carry out our work, but also a necessity at a time when women's and girls' rights are under attack in the world and those that speak up are met with threats and hatred. This

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<sup>17</sup> [Försäkringskassans AI pekar ut kvinnor som fuskare – Experten: "Vanskligt"](#)

is vital if we are to ensure sex-based rights of women and girls in Sweden, including mothers.