

A luke-warm reception:

The cooling of Sweden's asylum-seeker policies

Sweden is often referred to as the ideal country in its treatment of asylum-seekers and refugees and is renowned for its social welfare system. Swedish journalist HELENA JANSSON finds that despite this, it is not faultless.

Coils of razor wire and barbed wired fences don't surround the asylum-seekers in Sweden, but hunger strikes still take place amongst them. Suicide attempts, too. It might not be as common as in Australia, but it happens.

When it comes to asylum-seekers and refugees in Sweden, they are generally treated with more respect and humanity than in Australia. The issue being discussed in relation to asylum-seekers in Sweden are a far cry from those taking place in Australia.

Dr Kjerstin Almqvist is a clinical psychologist at Karlstad University in Sweden, who has mainly studied the effects of violence on child refugees. She is shocked when I tell her that all asylum-seekers, even women, children and unaccompanied minors, are locked up in Australia. She knew of such conditions in some parts of the

world, but believed it was better in Australia. "In comparison to that," she says, "our concerns are obviously miles away. Here we discuss how much health care or dental care one should have the right to as an asylum-seeker," she says, and laughs.

When asked if unaccompanied children have their own bedrooms or if they share rooms in the group accommodation or reception centres that the Migration Board provides, Kjerstin answers: "No, we don't have anything like that... everybody in the same room, not in Sweden!"

"I must have been in Australia for too long," I say and explain that many asylum-seekers in Australia have to share rooms in the detention centres and that they are often shoved into big halls together.

"No, that doesn't exist here," she says.

What is called a refugee camp, or refugee centre in Sweden is often misunderstood abroad.

They are actually ordinary residential flats in normal residential areas where mainly asylum-seekers and refugees live. Municipalities in more rural areas usually have vacant residential properties that they lease to the Migration Board.

Unaccompanied children often live together in group-accommodation where they have their own bedrooms but share their kitchen and living room. Most families get their own accommodation, but sometimes smaller families or single asylum-seekers, who do not know each other, might have to share a flat and that is when problems sometimes arise, according to Kjerstin. "But in the international perspective, I guess, one should look at these as luxury conflicts", she says.

Kjerstin tells of situations in Denmark and Belgium where asylum-seekers might have to live in large enclosures in camp-like environments that are not

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suitable for children. In the early 1990s, when Sweden had an influx of more than 80,000 Bosnian asylum-seekers, the asylum-seekers had to live in large refugee centres, which proved to be an unsuitable environment for children.

The strength in the Swedish system seems to be that child refugees are generally treated in the same way as Swedish children and that they live in ordinary accommodation within the community. Asylum-seeking children have the same rights, and free care, as Swedish children to education, health care, dental care and medical care. Once they have applied for asylum, schooling is arranged. The council of the county in which the children live receives a government grant so that they can give the children the care they need.

But there are weaknesses as well. The major problem seems to be the long waiting times for the result of refugee status. "It's too long," says Anders Sundquist, an immigration lawyer at Rådgivningsbyrån in Stockholm. On average, it takes one to one and half years before you get a result from the Migration Board, he explains, and it takes another eight to twelve months if you appeal that decision.

The decision from the Migration Board is somewhat quicker when it comes to unaccompanied children; on average it takes 6 months.

Kjerstin Almqvist knows that the long waiting causes destructive processes for children and their families "We have seen that this is often psychologically a very hard process for the children, because when a few years have gone by small children are so rooted in

Sweden that it's very difficult for them to imagine to return home."

There have been discussions that the long waiting times, caused by the judicial processes, should be speeded up and Kjerstin thinks one has to do so for the sake of the children. "One can't have these long hearing of cases, even if I know it's an expression of a law-governed society where one has the opportunity to appeal in different instances."

Anders Sundquist believes that Sweden honestly aspires to prioritise children's needs, but that the country cannot cope with it because of lack of resources. "The dilemma today is that we get more and more asylum-seekers all the time so the system doesn't cope."

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The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Swedish Aliens Act on the best interest of the child affect the way the Swedish Migration Board consider children's asylum applications.

Clinical psychologist Almqvist believes that Sweden has broken the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and refers to 'different' interpretations of the UN Convention and the Swedish Aliens Act. The Swedish Aliens Act has precedence over the Child Convention, and Kjerstin does not support this. "Practically,

it means that a family with a child can be deported even though the child, for example, might need medical care in Sweden. This is not given adequate consideration in applications for asylum."

Another problem, which has been widely discussed in the Swedish media, is the disappearance of unaccompanied minors from the Migration Board's group accommodation for young people. In mid-September, the major Swedish daily newspapers reported that 49 children and young people had disappeared this year, and 23 of those that summer.

There are various speculations for the reason of their disappearance. One explanation is that the young people might have received a negative result from the Migration Board and therefore gone underground, or another that they might have gone to another country to try and apply for asylum. But there are also suspicions that some young people have gone into prostitution.

Kjerstin can see how lone children can fall into prostitution and explains how there is a current investigation into a paedophilia scandal in relation to the refugee centres. "It's about someone using children who are seeking contact and who are defenceless. And one can imagine that children who are seeking contact and who are defenceless can fall into other trouble as well," she says.

In September, a 39-year old man was sentenced to five years in prison, for sexual abuse of four refugee children and for the crime of possessing child pornography. The man had been working as a janitor at a refugee centre.

Kjerstin points out that personnel working with child refugees lack competence and resources. There are not enough employees per child and no special education is required for people who work with refugee children. “They have been prioritising people with an immigration background, and there are some good reasons for this, such as competence in languages and understanding of childrens’ backgrounds, but they don’t have the same requirements as employees in the Swedish childcare. I think it has meant that some people have not acted as professionally as one might have wished for in certain circumstances.”

The disappearances of children led to a debate about who is actually responsible for the unaccompanied children arriving in Sweden - the Migration Board or the municipalities where the children live. A government appointed committee recommended that several municipalities should bear responsibility for unaccompanied children’s welfare whereas the Migration Board only should bear responsibility for children’s asylum applications.

While it has gradually become more difficult to receive refugee status, asylum-seekers and their legal representatives have turned to humanitarian reasons. “It has become more common in the past years that one focuses on psychological ill health as a way of receiving residence permit,” Kjerstin explains. “There’s now a situation of accelerating psychological ill health in children which intersects in a very unpleasant way with the asylum process and is supported by their

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legal representative.”

Over the past few years, suicide attempts among children have become more common. In a period of six months (from late 2001 to early 2002) eight young people at Carlslund Refugee Centre attempted to commit suicide and in April there were five attempts at another youth centre.

The clinical psychologist sees this trend as worrying, but explains that there is not much gained if a person gets better after feeling ill, but if he or she becomes worse it can benefit the application. She emphasizes, however, that this does not happen consciously. “A lot of children feel very strained because of their family’s situation, Mum is sad and Dad is sad and they feel bad... and if the children express how ill they feel then the situation might become better.”

Another major weakness in the treatment of asylum-seeker is that the youngest children do not have access to child welfare in the same way as Swedish children. The youngest children are at home with their parents, which might seem reasonable since the parents usually cannot work and therefore stay at home. However, ten years ago, according to Kjerstin, when the Migration Board had more resources, it used to arrange child welfare activities and pre-school activities for the children as well as the parents. But with fewer resources most of those activities had to stop. The

Swedish child welfare system no longer has the same qualities as it used to either, Kjerstin mentions. The sizes of children’s groups in day care centres have doubled and budget cuts for the public sector have affected both Swedish and refugee children.

For a long time, adult asylum-seekers have not been given work permits. Lately, the Migration Board has stated that if the asylum-seeking process is going to take longer than four months, the person in question will be permitted to work. But, according to Kjerstin, it is better in theory than in practice, and it is still very difficult for an asylum-seeker to get a work permit.

There is obviously room for improvement in Sweden’s treatment of asylum-seekers and refugees. The long waiting times have to be dealt with, and the qualification of people working with child refugees must be addressed too. Kjerstin also believes that it is important to focus more on children who have witnessed their mothers being violently abused. In the past year she has paid special attention to two children who have witnessed their mother being raped during war. She is interested in how the interplay between children and mothers has been damaged because of war.

“I’ve seen small children who look as if they were autistic; they don’t talk, they don’t look at you, they don’t smile, they hardly move. They have an expiring expression which is heartbreaking, partly as a result of what they’ve been through, but primarily, maybe, because their mother have pushed them away, because the mothers can’t stand being close to them since the

children's nearness raises such painful posttraumatic reactions in them."

She believes this situation requires more attention, since these children are in need of proper assistance and urgent care and that other primary minders for the children, the fathers for example, might have to take over if the mother can't take care of them. "They can't wait two or three years for their mothers to recover; by then they will have already been damaged to much in their development."

There are relatively good opportunities for assistance for children who have suffered trauma to be treated by psychologists, according to Kjerstin. But refugee children do not have any better opportunities than the Swedish children do. "There are generally long queues to the child psychiatry in Sweden and the refugee children get stuck in the queues in the same way as Swedish children do. Sometimes there are unacceptable long waiting times, but there are no special waiting times because they are refugee children." ■

Fact box Sweden

Sweden, with a population of 8.9 million hosted nearly 18,500 refugees and asylum-seekers at the end of 2001.

During 2001, 23,515 persons applied for asylum in Sweden – this was an increase of 7200 since the previous year. The increase mainly depended on the fact that the border controls between the Schengen countries were taken down. The largest groups of people came from Iraq (6,206), Yugoslavia (3,102), and Bosnia Herzegovina (2,775). Others came from Iran, Russia, El Salvador and Afghanistan.

The Swedish Migration Board is the first-instance decision-making authority and it issued nearly 18,400 asylum decisions during the year. Cases can be appealed at the Aliens Appeals Board. Until the Migration Board makes a decision the asylum-seeker can choose to stay with relatives or friends or in an apartment arranged by the Migration Board.

At the end of year 2000, some 6000 children under the age of 18 were registered with the Migration Board. Between 400 and 500 children arrive without their legal guardian in Sweden every year.

Schooling is arranged for school-aged child refugees in the same way as for Swedish children. The responsibility for providing education lies within the local authority of where the child lives. Children who seek asylum are entitled to health care, dental care and medical care in the same way as Swedish children.

The social service committee in the local authority area where unaccompanied children live has responsibility for the well being of the child. The committee might place the child in one of the Board's group accommodation centres or in their youth accommodation centres. A trustee is also appointed to help the child apply for asylum.