Evidence Bite - Insidious de-democratization: Conceptualizing anti-gender politics in Sweden

This article by Eva Karlberg, Elżbieta Korolczuk, and Hansabin Sältenberg explores how anti-gender politics operates in Sweden and why it matters for democratic inclusion. Sweden is often viewed as a global leader in gender equality, but CCINDLE research shows that anti-gender politics is gaining ground in the country; not through the dramatic rollback of rights, but via subtle, cumulative shifts in political language, institutional practices, and agenda setting. The article argues that these changes quietly weaken democratic participation and inclusion. This evidence bite offers a concise summary of its conclusions.

The **key observations** of the article include that:

1. Anti-gender politics can thrive in 'gender equal' democracies

In Sweden, opposition to gender equality rarely appears as outright rejection of women's rights. Instead, it is framed as:

- Defending 'common sense', neutrality, or science
- Protecting democracy from so-called 'gender ideology'
- Preserving social cohesion

In this way, anti-gender activists narrow who is considered a legitimate political subject.

2. Attacks focus on specific targets

Anti-gender politics in Sweden routinely centres three main areas:

- Migration: Gender equality is used to stigmatise migrant communities
- Knowledge: Gender studies and related research are dismissed as ideological or unscientific
- Trans rights: Trans people face increasing scrutiny and exclusion in policy and public debate

These targets overlap and reinforce each other, with already marginalised groups bearing the brunt.

3. 'Insidious de-democratization' erodes inclusion without visible collapse

The authors describe this process as 'insidious de-democratization', a phenomenon with a number of hallmarks:

- Democratic institutions remain formally intact
- Exclusionary ideas become normalised
- Marginalised voices are silenced or delegitimised

Over time, this reduces meaningful participation and weakens democratic norms.

The **key takeaway messages** of the article include to:

- **Watch the language:** Exclusion is often justified using democratic or equality-based terms.

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- **Defend knowledge:** Attacks on gender research undermine evidence-based policy and democracy.
- **Protect inclusion:** Trans, migrant, and racialised communities are central to democratic resilience, and the first to be targeted.

This study shows that democratic backsliding does not always look dramatic. Even strong democracies can slowly shift toward exclusion when anti-gender politics is allowed to reshape debate, knowledge, and policy. Anti-gender politics in Sweden works subtly, and recognising these patterns is essential for defending inclusive democracy before exclusion becomes normalised. You can read the article in full here.

For more information on the CCINDLE project, as well as publications, evidence bites, podcasts, videos and more, please visit our website: https://ccindle.org

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