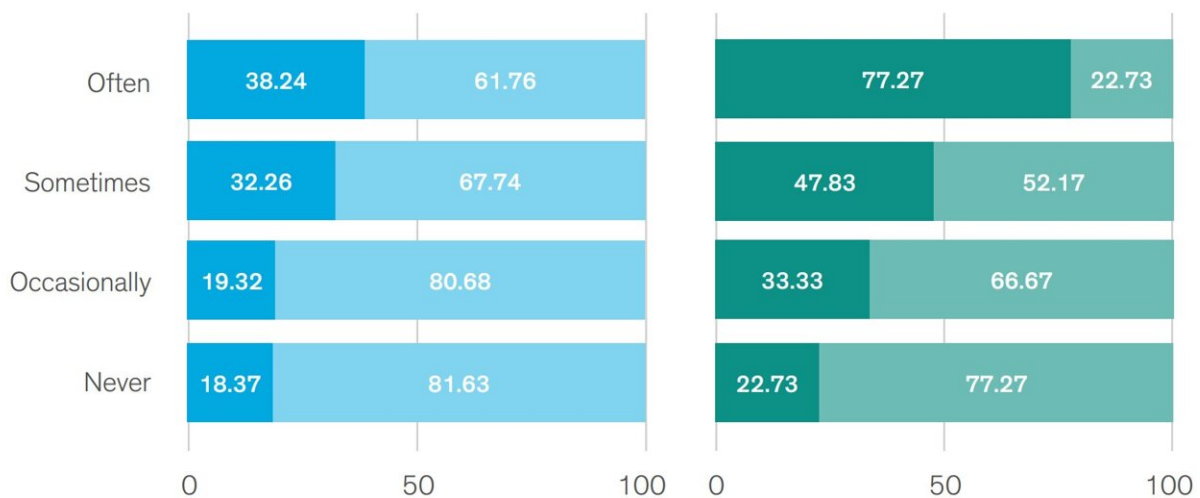


# Why language matters: Endangered languages and discrimination

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Frequency of using a Sámi language. Credit: *Why Language Matters: Inequality Perceptions among the Sámi in Sweden and Norway* (2023).

Every two weeks, one of the world's estimated 7,000 languages becomes extinct. It is estimated that only about half of our current languages will still be spoken in the coming century. When UNESCO's "International Mother Language Day" is celebrated on 21 February, another language is about to die.

What does it mean for a [language](#) minority to lose their language? In a study, researchers from the Cluster of Excellence "The Politics of

Inequality" at the University of Konstanz show clear correlations with [discrimination](#). Speakers of minority languages worldwide experience disadvantages in society, education and work—especially when they speak their language in public.

Comparing Norway and Sweden, the authors make suggestions for political courses of action: According to their study, promoting the language and culture of a minority is an effective lever for reducing discrimination, while socio-economic measures alone are insufficient.

On International Mother Language Day, the results of the study were published in the [policy](#) paper "Why Language Matters: Inequality Perceptions among the Sámi in Sweden and Norway." The policy paper provides a comprehensible overview of the scientific findings and identifies possible political courses of action.

## **Recognition as a national language reduces discrimination**

The study focused on the Sámi population in Norway and Sweden. In both countries, the Sámi are a social minority and the use of the Sámi language is equally declining. Norway, at least in parts of the country, recognizes Sámi as an official national language that is represented in [everyday life](#). Sweden does so too, but to a lesser extent.

The research findings show that in both countries, Sámi experience significantly more discrimination than the majority population. The most pronounced discrimination is experienced by people who speak Sámi in public. In comparing the two countries, it became clear that Swedish Sámi who use their indigenous language often are most strongly affected by discrimination.

Insufficient opportunities to learn and speak Sámi in school, as well as administrative hurdles, mean that Sámi speakers have very few opportunities to use their language outside of their families. Such barriers can become a form of structural discrimination. In the study, Sámi in Sweden described their impression that their country's language policy discourages them from learning and revitalizing their mother tongue.

One key result of the study is that showing appreciation for and establishing the language in everyday life has positive effects on the social standing of the minority which then reduces discrimination: "Discrimination against linguistic minorities is very often linked to a lack of appreciation for their language. Successful policies in Norway show: By integrating a minority language more strongly into the public sphere, for example through the use of multilingual signage and labeling in everyday life, discrimination can be successfully counteracted," emphasizes the research team of the Cluster of Excellence "The Politics of Inequality" at the University of Konstanz.

The researchers recommend a language policy that resolutely promotes respect and appreciation for Sámi languages, in order to combat discrimination and perceived inequalities.

**More information:** Policy paper: [www.exc.uni-konstanz.de/en/institutions/policy-papers/](http://www.exc.uni-konstanz.de/en/institutions/policy-papers/)

Provided by University of Konstanz

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