

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN OF FINLAND



# BEIJING+30

## NGOS' REPORT

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Women's human rights as a prerequisite  
for lasting peace

## WHAT IS THE BEIJING REPORT?

In 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was drawn up at the World Conference on Women in Beijing. On that occasion, 189 UN Member States recognised for the first time that women's rights are human rights and committed to actively promoting them. A wide range of issues related to women's lives were discussed specifically from the perspective of gender equality, and girls' human rights were also included in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The 30th anniversary of the Declaration falls in 2025. Following the Beijing World Conference on Women, the states and regions that signed the Declaration and Platform for Action have reported on the implementation of the Platform for Action every five years. The National Council of Women of Finland coordinates the traditional parallel report by NGOs in Finland. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs is responsible for the state's official report.

The UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) monitors the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. In 2025, the Commission's annual two-week session on the status of women will discuss the Beijing Platform for Action.

## FROM THE PRESIDENT

More than 50 NGOs participated in this Beijing+30 NGO report. This report is based on a survey that was sent to the member organisations of the National Council of Women of Finland and other stakeholders. The responses to the survey and the active commenting on the draft brought many kinds of expertise to the report, without which it would not have been possible to draw up the report. We would like to thank the participating organisations for their in-depth comments, reviews of the text, factual corrections and important additions. The organisations involved in drawing up the report are listed on the back cover. Once again, preparing the report allowed us to see the enormous expertise of civil society.

We would like to thank the author of the report, doctoral candidate **Minna Lyytikäinen**, for her extensive and careful work. Our thanks also go to **Annika Hinkkanen**, Specialist in Advocacy at the National Council of Women of Finland, for working on the report and for the sound and inclusive

management of the project. We would also like to thank other Council employees **Salla Kajanmaa**, Specialist in Communications, **Oona Foster**, Specialist in Advocacy, **Karoliina Paakkinen**, Specialist in Communications & Project Management, **Maria Tolvanen**, Administrative Assistant, **Anniina Vainio**, Advocacy Chief, **Sonja Raunio**, PhD Researcher, and **Katri Leino-Nzau**, Executive Director, for their expert comments and assistance.

Thank you to the Ministry of Education and Culture for the support in the Beijing+30 project. Thank you to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs for your cooperation in organising the report publication event.

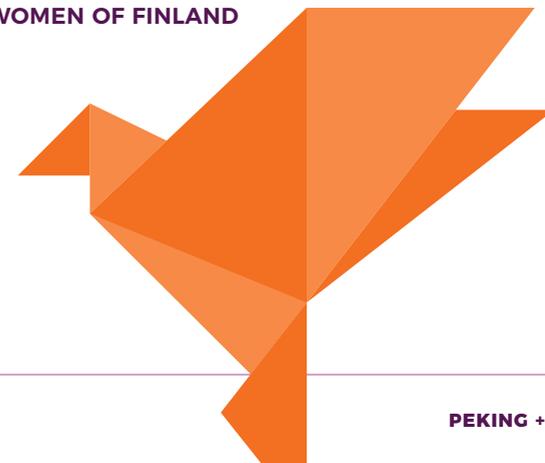
It is important that reports by NGOs highlight the problems faced by women belonging to minority groups, which have been left out of sight. Organisations also reach groups that otherwise would far too often fall through the cracks. For example, in 1995, the year the Beijing Declaration was made, the idea of gender was very binary, meaning that only male and female were recognised as genders. Today, gender diversity is recognised for the most part also in official reports.

The themes of the report are derived from the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the topics of which cover the entire society. That is why this report also includes examples related to the church, exercise and sport. At the beginning of each chapter, you will find the recommendations of the National Council of Women of Finland for ministries and other parties promoting gender equality.

Many gender equality challenges that seemed impossible have been overcome through the systematic collaboration of civil society. This will also happen with our current challenges. We are making the world more equal – together!

## THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN OF FINLAND

**Saara-Sofia Sirén | President**



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## INTRODUCTION

This report discusses the development of women's and girls' rights in Finland in 2019–2024. The period under review is characterised by several global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. They have revealed the inequality of Finnish society and partially weakened the rights of women and girls. At the same time, however, these crises have demonstrated the strengths of an equal society in adapting to crises.

Despite the crises, significant legislative progress has been made in Finland to safeguard the rights of women and girls. The legislation on sexual offences has been amended to be based on consent, family leave has been reformed and the Act on Legal Recognition of Gender has been updated to respect the right to self-determination. The Finnish Parliament is currently discussing legislative proposals on the clearer punishability of forced marriages and female genital mutilation, and mediation in cases of domestic violence is largely being discontinued.

New challenges to the realisation of gender equality and human rights have been brought about by, for example, the development of communications technology without regulation that would ensure the safety, health and well-being of girls and women. The anti-gender movement has also gained strength, which has led to rhetoric opposing sexual and reproductive rights as well as sexual and gender minorities and the discrimination experienced by LGBTQI+ people both becoming more widespread. During the period under review, girls' mental health has plummeted and experiences of violence have started to increase for the first time in several decades.

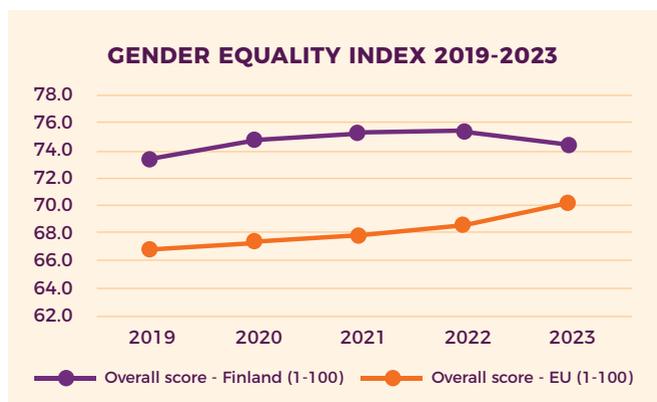
Large-scale cuts have a strong impact on women, and they are being carried out without adequate impact assessments. Cuts in social security and unemployment cover have been particularly targeted at young people, single-parent families and women working in low-paying sectors. Cuts in the promotion of gender equality and the work against discrimination, such as the closure of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare's Centre for Gender Equality Information and cuts in support for NGOs, weaken the opportunities to promote the rights of women and girls in Finland and around the world. The cuts deepen the existing care crisis and generate significant long-term costs for society as a whole. Our economic system relies on women's work being cheap and free. Investment in care work is easily seen as just an expense, even though it can create more jobs and tax revenue than, for example, investments in construction. The growing care deficit, on the other hand, worsens the conditions for all economic activities.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Finland's historic decision to join NATO have increased militarisation at all levels of society. Growing militarism leads to more masculine decision-making and underappreciation of the work done for peace and gender equality. At the same time, hate speech, polarisation and the increasingly harsh discussion culture weaken the state of gender equality and democracy and the general feeling of security in people's everyday lives.

Looking at international comparisons, the development of gender equality in Finland seems to have stalled. In the latest comparison by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Finland fell from fourth place in 2019 to eighth place in 2023. The average for the EU as a whole is improving and, in several countries around Europe, progress in different areas of gender equality has clearly been faster than in Finland. In the latest comparison, Finland was outpaced by France and Spain, among others. There are shortcomings in the realisation of gender equality, particularly in terms of gender distribution in the economy, care, education and professional sectors and the intervention in and prevention of violence, as well as in terms of intersecting differences and non-discrimination.

In its latest session, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women issued recommendations to Finland in five areas: gender-based hate speech, reform of the Act on Sterilisation, mediation in cases of domestic violence, the representation of women on the candidate lists of political parties and the representation of women in decision-making positions in the defence forces.

Gender diversity is often overlooked in the planning and implementation of public decision-making. As a rule, the gender distribution in surveys conducted in Finland is binary and does not necessarily take into account various intersecting differences

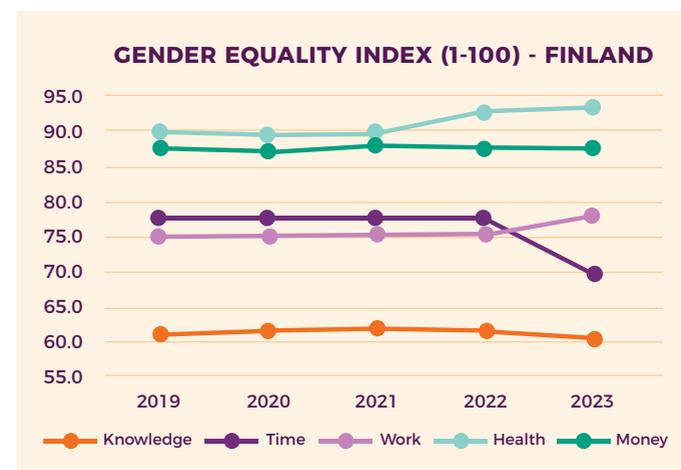


**Caption:** The EU is catching up with Finland in gender equality  
**Source:** European Institute for Gender Equality EIGE 2023

or people belonging to gender minorities. If gender minorities are considered as a separate group in a survey, it is often impossible to draw comprehensive conclusions due to small sample size. Accumulating research information on the position and experiences of people who are part of a gender minority or another minority is a challenge that needs to be solved soon in Finland as well.

In addition to gender diversity, multiple or intersecting discrimination is not systematically taken into account in the production of information and in decision-making. Experiences of discrimination multiply and change in quality when, in addition to legal gender, we look at gender identity, disability, ethnic background, wealth, age, living conditions, sexual orientation, cultural identity, language, educational level, immigration history or other personal characteristics. The legal situation is particularly poor for women and girls whose opportunities for participation in Finnish society have decreased due to poverty, discrimination, lack of health services, homelessness, addiction, unemployment and experiences of violence.

Gender equality and human rights in Finland, as described in this report, need strong and determined defenders. Growing polarisation, hate speech, the care crisis and spending cuts lead to a need for active efforts to safeguard gender equality and human rights. In defending girls' and women's rights, one approach that particularly offers solutions is intersectional feminism, which also takes into account differences between women and sees the connection between the realisation of women's rights and the realisation of gender and sexual minorities' rights.



**Caption:** At the European level, Finland performs best in the domains of health and money. Finland's lowest score is in the domain of knowledge.  
**Source:** European Institute for Gender Equality EIGE (2023)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Allocate sufficient human and financial resources for the implementation of the Istanbul Convention and the Committee for Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 2 Pass an act on structures that would clarify the work done to prevent domestic violence **(Ministry of Justice)**
- 3 Ensure the resources and regional coverage of violence prevention work and low-threshold services. Obligate the perpetrator to participate in violence prevention and intervention programmes and ensure that the victim has access to support services **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 4 Improve violence expertise (identification and addressing) as part of the mandatory studies of social and health care curricula and in the regional well-being plans of the wellbeing services counties **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, wellbeing services counties)**
- 5 Ensure that the case management for victims and those who have experienced domestic violence works after the amendment to the Act on Conciliation in Criminal and Certain Civil Cases has entered into force (responsibility of the authorities). Identify organisations that work to eliminate violence as important service providers and guarantee sufficient resources for them **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 6 Increase the number of shelters for victims of domestic violence in line with the recommendations of the Istanbul Convention and ensure access to shelters throughout the country. Allocate sufficient resources for ensuring the accessibility of shelters. Ensure services after a period in a shelter **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 7 Fully implement the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention. Amend the Occupational Safety And Health Act so that the employer is obligated to ensure that harassment or other inappropriate treatment ceases without delay. Make neglecting this obligation a punishable occupational safety and health violation **(Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment)**
- 8 Enhance the identification of victims of sexual abuse in human trafficking and ensure access to support. Amend the legislation on shelters for victims of domestic violence and its application so that victims of human trafficking can be accommodated in a shelter regardless of whether human trafficking involves domestic violence **(Ministry of the Interior)**
- 9 Strengthen national structures and coordinated action (such as the action plan for the prevention of female genital mutilation) to prevent female genital mutilation and "honour"-related violence. Increase the mandatory training of professionals, raise awareness through sexuality education and campaigns and guarantee victims support services in accordance with Article 27 of the EU Directive on Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 10 Monitor the implementation of the legislation on forced marriage as part of the "Trafficking in human beings" section of the Criminal Code and investigate whether there is a need for the criminalisation of forced marriage as a separate type of crime **(Ministry of Justice)**
- 11 Amend the Act on Child Custody and Right of Access to comply with the Istanbul Convention **(Ministry of Justice)**
- 12 Allocate sufficient resources for the Non-Violent Childhood Action Plan and implement the Action Plan in accordance with the recommendations issued by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2023 **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 13 Implement an LGBTQI+ policy action plan to enhance the efforts to combat hate crimes and the threat of violence against LGBTQI+ people **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 14 Repeal chapter 20, section 5 of the Criminal Code so that all crimes involving sexual intercourse are included in the statutory definition of rape instead of sexual abuse **(Ministry of Justice)**
- 15 Increase professionals' and authorities' understanding of the use of technology as a means of violence and improve access to support for those who have been experienced violence. Establish a multidisciplinary special expertise unit that provides professionals and authorities with up-to-date information on new forms of digital violence and offers technical assistance to those who have experienced violence in protecting themselves from digital violence **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 16 Add legal gender, gender identity, gender expression and gender features of the body to the definition of a hate crime and to the statutory definition of the type of crime called "Agitation against a population group". Criminalise targeted online harassment **(Ministry of Justice)**

- 17 Comprehensively criminalise conversion therapy that is aimed at changing an individual's sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression **(Ministry of Justice)**
- 18 Apply the aggravating circumstances stated in the Istanbul Convention in the case of violence against a current or former partner **(Ministry of Justice)**
- 19 Criminalise coercive control **(Ministry of Justice)**
- 20 Ensure that the police investigate all violence against women promptly and carefully throughout Finland. Develop police training on themes related to gender-based violence, encountering victims and identifying domestic violence **(Ministry of the Interior, National Police Board)**
- 21 Ensure that the violence and domestic violence experienced by immigrant women are better taken into account in the criteria for a residence permit **(Ministry of the Interior, Finnish Immigration Service)**
- 22 Lift a Member of Parliament's parliamentary immunity in cases of agitation against a population group **(Ministry of Justice)**
- 23 Draw up a national strategy against hate speech and hate crimes for Finland, which takes into account legal gender, gender identity, gender expression and gender features of the body as motives for hate speech and hate crimes **(Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 24 Increase the responsibility of internet service providers to eradicate gendered hate speech and harassment at the EU level and in Finland **(Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Ministry for Foreign Affairs)**
- 25 Secure the funding of Seri Support Centers for Victims of Sexual Assault with a government grant, the same way shelters for victims of domestic violence are funded. Ensure the services of Seri Support Centers as well as people's awareness of them throughout Finland and strengthen the service chains to further support provided by NGOs. It must be possible to seek out the services of Seri Support Centers up to six months after the experience of violence **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 26 Obligate sports organisations receiving government grants to draw up plans to combat gender-based violence **(Ministry of Education and Culture)**
- 27 Ensure the right of immigrant women who have experienced violence to a non-violent life and an independent residence permit **(Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finnish Immigration Service)**

In Finland, experiences of violence are highly gendered. According to a survey by Statistics Finland, women experience violence more often than men during their lives and are more likely than men to feel that the violence has caused them physical injuries and psychological symptoms. Men experience more violence from strangers or acquaintances than women, while women experience more domestic violence and sexual violence than men. Women experience repeated violence more frequently than men. Both in violence experienced by women and in violence experienced by men, the perpetrators are usually men. Of women, 57% have experienced physical violence, sexual violence or threats. The corresponding figure for men is 46%<sup>1</sup>.

**VIOLENCE EXPERIENCED BY GIRLS HAS STARTED TO INCREASE FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 30 YEARS**



Over the past five years, important progress has been made in combatting violence against women in Finland. During the 2019–2023 government term, the legislation on sexual offences underwent a comprehensive reform, in which the rape legislation was amended to be based on consent. At the same time, an action plan for combatting violence against women was implemented, the post of National Rapporteur on violence against women was established and the coordination of work against human trafficking was made permanent<sup>2</sup>. The current Government Programme includes an entry regarding the discontinuation of mediation in cases of domestic violence. In 2024, legislative proposals were made on criminalising female genital mutilation and enhancing the punishability of forced marriages. Seri Support Centers for victims of sexual violence have been built in hospitals throughout Finland in recent years. THL has published recommendations for municipalities and wellbeing services counties on coordinating anti-violence work and arranging services. The knowledge base on violence against women has also been added to<sup>3</sup>, but there are still many deficiencies in the services and not all measures have progressed as planned. Despite these measures, there has been no decrease in the violence experienced by women, and the violence experienced by girls has even started to rise for the first time in 30 years.

### **ONE IN THREE WOMEN HAVE EXPERIENCED PHYSICAL VIOLENCE IN A RELATIONSHIP**

Domestic violence against women has not decreased at all in almost 10 years: A third of Finnish women aged 16–74 have experienced physical violence from

their partner. According to a European comparative study<sup>4</sup>, Finnish women report experiences of violence more than women in the other 10 countries in the study. Finnish women experience a particularly high level of repeated violence and different forms of violence. A quarter of women who have been in a relationship have experienced both physical and psychological violence from their partner (of men, just over 10% had similar experiences)<sup>5</sup>. Women in Finland also have a high risk of being killed by a partner compared to other Western countries. In the early 2000s, the number of women killed by a partner decreased, but from the 2010s onwards, the decrease has stopped. The number of homicides committed by former partners has even increased since the early 2000s<sup>6</sup>.

**NO DEFINITION OF AN OFFENCE AS SUCH COVERS COERCIVE CONTROL, I.E. LONG-TERM PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE WITH WHICH A PERSON ATTEMPTS TO RESTRICT THE FREEDOM OF ACTION OF ANOTHER PERSON.**



The COVID-19 pandemic and the related restrictions made the situation of women and girls experiencing domestic violence even more difficult. At the level of the entire population, it seems that the COVID-19 crisis did not significantly increase domestic violence. However, studies<sup>7</sup> show that experiences of violence have increased, changed form and become more serious in some population groups. Due to the restrictions, violence was more concentrated in the homes. In a study investigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender equality, it was found that women who have experienced violence reported more often than men that they were not able to access adequate help in health, social and justice services, excluding the Seri Support Centers<sup>8</sup>.

According to a report<sup>9</sup> by the Ministry of Justice, psychological violence is rarely punished as assault in Finland, and the current legislation is not applicable to psychological violence in intimate relationships. No statutory definition of a crime by itself covers coercive control, i.e. long-term psychological violence by which a person attempts to restrict the freedom of action of another person. Coercive control often leads to serious mental and physical health problems, and attempts to free oneself from it can expose victims to serious violence. Coercive control may result in, for example, substance abuse and suicide attempts, but the signs of it are not always visible to others. Coercive control is a

common form of intimate partner violence, but it can also be targeted at other family members. It can occur in various care relationships as well as in spiritual violence, especially in honour-related violence<sup>10</sup>. The report by the Ministry of Justice proposes adding the statutory definition of coercive control to the Criminal Code<sup>11</sup>. The Istanbul Convention also requires Finland to criminalise coercion that seriously threatens the victim's functional capacity and mental health. Article 33 of the Convention specifically requires the consideration of continuous and low-intensity violence instead of individual acts of violence. Looking into the criminalisation of coercive control is included in the current Government Programme.

Mediation in cases of domestic violence may downplay the severity of the violence. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has drawn attention to the use of mediation in cases of domestic violence, and the current Government Programme includes an entry on the partial discontinuation of mediation. Mediation must be completely discontinued in accordance with the Istanbul Convention, and the perpetrators of violence must be referred to the appropriate services and intervention programmes. According to the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, the police and prosecutors use varying criteria for referral to mediation, and in many cases the pre-trial investigation is not completed. In addition, the recurrence of violence was not generally considered an obstacle to mediation if the police or the mediation office had not been informed of the earlier violence<sup>12</sup>. In practice, this means that perpetrators can even commit serious violent crimes without sanctions. In addition, the referral of perpetrators to violence intervention services has not progressed as required by law, even though workable models have been in use for years<sup>13</sup>.

The situation of structures, coordination and services for the prevention of domestic violence varies greatly from region to region. The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and several women's and non-governmental organisations have recommended passing a law that would clarify the work to prevent domestic violence. With the help of such a law, anti-violence work could be tied to the structures of wellbeing services counties, such as the well-being strategy and the safety plans. The wellbeing services counties should also have permanent coordinators for domestic violence and an action plan for the prevention of violence that is monitored. Wellbeing services counties should adopt a method for raising concerns about violence and for risk assessment.

Violence prevention requires strong coordination and more resources from wellbeing services counties as well. Helping the parties involved in violence requires special expertise and working time, of which there are not enough in the current services of the wellbeing services counties. The wellbeing services counties could also acquire this additional resource as outsourced services from NGOs that have been involved in anti-violence work for a long time and already have expertise in this work.

The Istanbul Conventions requires municipalities to cooperate with NGOs that provide the majority of support services to those who have experienced violence. The funding of these services should be extended to long-term support, and the continuity of women-specific anti-violence work should be ensured. Currently, there is little long-term support available and, usually, no funding is granted for it. Women-specific anti-violence work, on the other hand, is only carried out in the third sector, as the public sector provides services for all genders on the basis of the universality principle.

Professionals also need more training than they currently receive on the identification of violence and how to intervene in it. This training should be a mandatory part of the basic and further training of professionals and should not be based solely on voluntary activities or interest.

There are many factors stopping immigrant women who have experienced domestic violence from receiving help. For example, the impact of community attitudes, fear of the impact of cultural differences on the quality of assistance, uncertainty about available resources, lack of resources, privacy concerns or worry about being judged, the language barrier and the professionals' lack of skills stop women from seeking help when they experience violence. More information is needed about the domestic violence experienced by women with a foreign background living in Finland. Research is also needed on what kinds of resources care staff and other parties providing support have available to help immigrant women in cases of domestic violence and how these capabilities could be improved<sup>14</sup>.

### **THE ACT ON CHILD CUSTODY AND RIGHT OF ACCESS DOES NOT MEET INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS**

The Act on Child Custody and Right of Access was amended in 2019. Women's organisations stated that Article 31 of the Istanbul Convention should have been taken into account in its entirety. The reformed act only takes part of the article into account. The Act requires that the guardians must protect the child from

violence and that, when making a decision on the child's residence and right of access, the parents' ability to protect the child from violence must be taken into account. This is problematic, as national studies show that the authorities consider the non-violent parent to be obligated to protect the child, and if the parent fails to do so, they may be considered not fit to be a guardian<sup>15</sup>.

The Istanbul Convention requires that violence against one parent must be taken into account when making decisions on the custody of children and the right of access. The Convention also requires the implementation of the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that the exercise of the rights of access or custody does not compromise the rights and safety of the victim or children. The amended act does not pay attention to the victim's safety as required by the Convention.

### **SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IS VERY COMMON IN FINLAND**

According to a report<sup>16</sup> by Statistics Finland, 43% of women and 12% of men have experienced sexual violence. Of all women aged 16–74 who have ever been in a relationship, 9% reported having been raped by their partner. 34% of women have experienced sexual violence outside of a relationship after turning 15 years old. These experiences are the most common among women aged 16–34, of whom 43% have experienced sexual violence outside of a relationship. 16% of women have been victims of rape in childhood or adulthood.

The amended legislation on sexual offences entered into force in 2023, and the statutory definition of rape changed to being based on consent. The aim of the amendment is to strengthen the protection of sexual self-determination and bodily integrity<sup>17</sup>. The amendment is a significant step forward in achieving gender equality, but the law is not entirely equal. The section on sexual abuse (chapter 20, section 5 of the Criminal Code) was not completely eliminated in the amendment of the legislation on sexual offences, even though NGOs proposed it in their statements. The section on sexual abuse means that sexual intercourse or enticement into a sexual act from a position of power is a crime subject to lesser punishment than rape, even though the imbalance of power places the victim in a particularly vulnerable position. This means that, for example, rape of a person with disabilities living in an institution or a 16-year-old school student is punished as sexual abuse and not as rape.

According to an attitude survey commissioned by Amnesty International's Finnish section about a year after the amendment, there are still many deficiencies in the adoption of the amendment at the level of attitudes.

According to the survey, consent as a concept is quite well known, but the responsibility related to ensuring voluntary participation is still not recognised to the same extent. Of the respondents, 48% believed that a person must refuse to have sex out loud or physically resist in order for the act to be sexual violence. According to the survey, young age groups understand the concept of consent better than other age groups<sup>18</sup>.

Sexual offence and domestic violence investigations may take years, despite the fact that these are serious crimes against life and health. Measured by police department, the clearance rate for rapes is, at worst, less than half. Of all suspected rapes reported to the police, only about 20% lead to a charge and 15% to a conviction. Finland has received numerous judgments from the European Court of Human Rights on the duration of criminal procedures. It is still important to increase the knowledge of professionals (such as police, judges and prosecutors) about violence against women and make such training mandatory<sup>19</sup>.

### **EDUCATION ABOUT FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION (FGM) MUST BE IMPROVED**

There are an estimated 650–3,100 girls living in Finland who are at risk of being subjected to female genital mutilation<sup>20</sup>. At the time of writing, Finland is the only Nordic country where female genital mutilation is not specifically prohibited by law. Although, in principle, the current legislation on assault can also be used in cases of female genital mutilation, no sentences have been passed for female genital mutilation in Finland. With regard to serious forms of mutilation, the legislation is clearer, but, especially in more minor cases, it is uncertain whether a punishment would be imposed. Criminalising FGM as a separate type of crime would make it clear to law enforcement and health care professionals that it is a serious offence.

During the 2019–2023 government term, a working group looked into creating a law prohibiting female genital mutilation on the basis of a citizens' initiative. The working group's aim was to submit a bill to Parliament during the government term. However, in early 2023, the working group decided not to propose amendments to the Criminal Code. The current Government Programme includes an entry on the introduction of a bill criminalising female genital mutilation. In the summer of 2024, the Government's proposal to make FGM more punishable was submitted to Parliament for consideration.

Both health care providers and schools lack information about female genital mutilation. Professionals – such as social and family workers, early childhood

education and care professionals, the police and teachers – do not have sufficient knowledge and competence to address female genital mutilation or offer help and services to girls and women who have experienced genital mutilation. The national structures have become stronger since THL took on coordination responsibility for the work to prevent female genital mutilation, but the Government's spending cuts in 2024 have significantly reduced the personnel resources allocated for this purpose by THL. The training regarding female genital mutilation is still optional for professionals. Sexuality education has not been increased or developed in this respect, and no visible campaigns have been implemented. Support services are almost entirely reliant on NGOs, and their funding is going to be under threat in the future.

### **HONOUR-RELATED VIOLENCE REQUIRES URGENT ACTION**

Honour-related violence has not been studied particularly extensively in Finland, but it affects the lives of many Finns of foreign background and residents of Finland, especially in the age groups of young people and young adults. Honour-related violence seeks to preserve or restore the honour of the community in situations where the suspected or actual behaviour of an individual is felt to cause shame and stigma. This violence often manifests itself as control, restriction and other forms of violence, especially in situations related to gender and sexuality. Girls and women, sexual and gender minorities and people seeking to leave religions and communities are particularly vulnerable. Honour-related violence is often present during puberty, when young people's desire for independence clashes with the community's rules, values and norms related to gender and sexuality. This may involve social restriction (e.g. isolating an individual by making them stay at home) and psychological violence (e.g. pressure)<sup>21</sup>.

According to Statistics Finland, 8% of people with a foreign background have personal experience of honour-related violence (of people with a Finnish background, 2% have such experiences) and 17% of people with a foreign background in Finland have either witnessed or experienced honour-related violence<sup>22</sup>. In 2021, 3% of the customers of shelters for victims of domestic violence in Finland had experienced honour-related violence<sup>23</sup>.

According to a report by the Finnish League for Human Rights, Finnish authorities and professionals in immigration administration, integration and social services, education, health care, police and foreign affairs administration generally have insufficient information about honour-related violence and

how to intervene in it<sup>24</sup>. Honour-related violence often involves psychological violence and coercion, which has not been criminalised in Finland, making it difficult to intervene in milder or early forms of honour-related violence. Criminalisation of coercive control could support the prevention of honour-related violence in its early stages and make it possible for criminal liability to be realised even in cases where there is no other violence or no evidence of it<sup>25</sup>.

The safety of women who have experienced coercive control must be improved and their awareness of their rights must be increased. Increased understanding is needed of, for example, the effects of stalking, including cross-border stalking, and control on the lives of women with an immigrant background living in Finland, and more ways to address stalking are also needed.

Women's access to support could be improved through clear and multilingual communication and by providing more services in immigrants' native languages. The use of interpreters is not always possible, especially for small language groups, for safety reasons, which prevents immigrant women from receiving help and exercising their rights. The availability of services in immigrants' native languages can be increased through non-discriminatory recruitment processes that support diversity. Women-specific low-threshold services play an important role in combatting honour-related violence.

In 2023, 20% of the customers of the Assistance System for Victims of Human Trafficking were victims of human trafficking related to forced marriage<sup>26</sup>. The current legislation does not apply to all forced marriage cases, and forcing a person to enter into a marriage has not been criminalised as a separate type of crime. On the basis of current legislation, forcing a person to enter into a marriage can be punished as trafficking in human beings, aggravated trafficking in human beings or coercion. Criminalising forced marriage as a separate type of crime would fulfil the obligations of Article 37 of the Istanbul Convention.

Clarification of the punishability of forced marriage was included in the current Government Programme, and the Ministry of Justice began preparing the matter in autumn 2023. In the government proposal, it was proposed that forcing a person to enter into a marriage should be added as one of the purposes of human trafficking. In addition to legally valid marriages, the law was extended to cover informal unions entered into through a religious or cultural ceremony, for example. The punishability also covers forcing a person to stay married. Forcing a person to enter into a marriage is not criminalised as a separate type of crime. If it was, it would be recognised as a specific form of violence against women, which also occurs in contexts other than the

actual context of human trafficking. Several NGOs supported a separate law because the threshold for bringing charges of trafficking in human beings may be too high, as there have been few criminal charges brought on the basis of the current legislation on human trafficking when compared to the extent of the phenomenon. If forced marriages are only included in the section on trafficking in human beings, some forced marriages may not be covered by the law. The new law requires monitoring and, if necessary, amendment to include forced marriage as its own type of crime. The government proposal was submitted to Parliament for consideration in summer 2024.

The goals of the UN Agenda 2030, to which Finland is committed, include ending child marriages and forced marriages. In Finland, the criminalisation of child marriage came into force in early 2019, but the legislative reform did not include changes concerning the recognition of marriages entered into abroad. The clear position of the UN and several international children's rights organisations is that children can never give their valid consent to marriage. A child marriage is therefore always a forced marriage and should not be recognised under any circumstances.

## DIGITAL VIOLENCE IS A RAPIDLY GROWING FORM OF VIOLENCE

According to an analysis by Statistics Finland, women experience online harassment most frequently in private messages and experience sexual harassment or other "inappropriate behaviour" online more often than men. Of the women who have experienced online harassment, 16% have been subjected to a physical threat to themselves or their loved ones. Online harassment and hate speech target young women and girls in particular: Of women and girls aged 16–24, up to 87% have experienced or witnessed online harassment or violence<sup>27</sup>. For those who have experienced domestic violence, digital violence is often part of the continuum of violence: of all girls and women aged 16–74 who have ever been in a relationship, 12% have experienced harassment or violence online by their current or former partner<sup>28</sup>.



**OF WOMEN AGED 16-24, UP TO 87% HAVE EXPERIENCED OR WITNESSED ONLINE HARASSMENT OR VIOLENCE**

According to a study by Tampere University and the Police University College, digital violence against women is often not recognised as violence and a crime.

and the phenomenon has become normalised as a part of everyday life<sup>29</sup>. Girls and young women experience plenty of sexual harassment and violence online, such as harassing messages, extortion with intimate images<sup>30</sup> and distribution of intimate images. According to a report<sup>31</sup> by UN Women Finland, women under the age of 25 have experienced almost twice as much online harassment (74%) as women on average (38%). 61% of women under the age of 25 have received unwanted sexual images. In 2023, almost half of the cases that were related to 6-12-year old children that Someturva was contacted about had to do with sexual offences against children<sup>32</sup>.

Online grooming is a growing phenomenon. In online grooming, an adult lures a child to engage in seemingly voluntary interaction with the aim of committing sexual violence against the child. According to a survey carried out by Save the Children Finland, 62% of the 11-17-year-old children living in Finland who responded to the survey had been contacted online by an adult or a person five years older than them. Grooming was more targeted at girls (67%) than boys (34%), and the group that was contacted the most was children whose gender is undefined (73%). Of the children, 17% received sexual messages weekly and 29% monthly<sup>33</sup>.

Technology-facilitated violence is still poorly identified and support services are limited<sup>34</sup>. Women's Line offers conversation support to those who have experienced digital violence as well as technical support and support in the criminal process in accordance with international recommendations. Sufficient legal and technical support and cooperation with the police that would be in line with the recommendations cannot be arranged with the current resources<sup>35</sup>. In order to identify and prevent digital violence, it is essential that the ministries start to better identify the rapid development of technology and artificial intelligence and its harmful effects from the perspective of violence against girls and women. Professionals and authorities must also be better prepared to identify the special experiences and needs of minority groups, such as immigrants and LGBTQI+ people, as victims of harassment and other forms of violence.

Forms of digital violence are constantly evolving, which emphasises the need for professionals to continuously update their knowledge and skills. To support this, a multidisciplinary special expertise unit, which professionals could consult if necessary, should be established. Victims' services must be improved by offering victims not only psychological support but also concrete technical support, such as instructions on protecting against and uninstalling tracking software and preventing harassment and stalking via digital channels.

## THE INCREASE IN HATE CRIMES IS A SERIOUS THREAT TO GENDER EQUALITY

Hate speech and hate crimes reduce women's opportunities for participation as well as their freedom of expression and speech, and undermine women's safety and gender equality in many ways. Hate speech is a serious threat to gender equality, democracy and freedom of speech. In Finland, women's risk of experiencing both sexual harassment and hate speech is more than five times bigger than that of men. Being part of a minority exposes women in particular to hate speech. Of those who have experienced gendered hate speech, 62% have also experienced sexual harassment<sup>36</sup>. However, gendered hate speech against women is not always perceived as a particularly harmful or damaging act.

**RESEARCH EVIDENCE CONFIRMS THAT INCREASED HATE SPEECH ALSO LEADS TO A HIGHER NUMBER OF HATE CRIMES.**

**#!?**

In the summer of 2024, stabbings targeting people with an immigrant background prompted a discussion about the escalating tension in Finland. International research evidence<sup>37</sup> confirms that increased hate speech in politics or on social media leads to a larger number of hate crimes. Hate crimes have increased significantly in Finland. The number of suspected hate crimes has been on the rise since 2020. According to an analysis<sup>38</sup> by the Police University College in 2022, 21% more reports of suspected hate crimes were recorded than in the previous year and the same as in the record year of 2015, when an exceptionally high number of asylum seekers arrived in Finland. Most of the suspected hate crimes were motivated by the victim's ethnic background or nationality.

Experiences of hate speech are particularly common among young women who are part of a minority group. In 2022, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) urged Finland to criminalise sexist, misogynist and other forms of gender-based hate speech, including forms of hate speech against immigrant women, women with disabilities and women who are part of a national minority. The recommendation related to the criminalisation of hate speech is subject to the Committee's expedited monitoring.

According to a report prepared by the Police University College in 2021, there are deficiencies in the identification and handling of hate motives

in the criminal process, and punishments are rarely increased on the basis of a hate motive. The report recommends the compulsory use of the hate crime classification in connection with the registration of a crime report, the enhancement of pre-trial investigation cooperation, the updating of the police interrogation guidelines and the broader recording of considerations regarding the increasing of the punishment in judgments.

## HUMAN TRAFFICKING IS STILL POORLY IDENTIFIED

Every year, a record number of people seek help from the Assistance System for Victims of Human Trafficking.<sup>39</sup>The National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings has repeatedly pointed out that human trafficking, especially in connection with sexual abuse, is poorly identified in Finland. The application and interpretation of rules is limited.

In Finland, victims of human trafficking that is related to sexual abuse often come from other EU countries or from outside Europe. Victims may also include vulnerable people, such as young Finnish citizens with a substance addiction, whose exploitation is not always seen as part of human trafficking: the risk of becoming a victim of human trafficking is particularly high among children and young people placed in a child welfare institution who have left the institution without permission<sup>40</sup>. Foreigners who sell sex in Finland often fail to report the crimes committed against them. The Aliens Act contains a provision according to which a suspicion of the sale of sexual services is a possible ground for denying admittance or stay of third-country nationals. Since the sale of sexual services is not considered to be an employment relationship, labour legislation will not offer any protection to these people either<sup>41</sup>. Official support measures are unevenly distributed regionally and the special characteristics and needs of human trafficking are poorly identified in public services. There are no professional forms of safe supported housing for victims other than those who have experienced domestic violence.

A report by the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman investigated the implementation of the principle of non-punishment for victims of human trafficking in Finland. According to the report, victims of human trafficking who have been forced into crime are not identified in the criminal process. The subtle and complex psychological effects of human trafficking are not always identified or taken into account. The outcome of the decision is made more difficult by the understanding of how people form their will and ability to act, as well as the ability of others to influence them. Similarly, the fact that

the victim is a minor at the time of the crime is not taken into account when bringing charges, timing charges or passing a sentence, even though being a minor means vulnerability and susceptibility to exploitation. The police's expertise on violence against women, sexual violence, digital violence and human trafficking must be secured by concentrating the investigations on investigators who are specially trained in the Criminal Investigation Act.

## GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN ARE EXPERIENCING MORE VIOLENCE

Intimate partner violence is very common in the romantic relationships of girls and young women. According to a study by Statistics Finland, 60% of those aged 18-21 who have ever been in a relationship have experienced violence from their partner, while 25% have experienced physical or sexual violence<sup>43</sup>. According to a survey conducted by Tampere University, digital violence is the most common form of violence in the romantic relationships of girls and young women. In the survey, nearly half of the young people who have ever been in a romantic relationship reported experiencing digital violence<sup>44</sup>. More than 40% of young people had experienced face-to-face psychological violence from their partner. Up to a quarter of young people had experienced sexual pressuring or coercion in their relationship. When it comes to physical violence, 16% of the young people surveyed by Tampere University had experienced physical violence from their partner.

**EXPERIENCES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE ARE APPROXIMATELY TWICE AS COMMON AMONG GIRLS WITH DISABILITIES THAN AMONG OTHER GIRLS**

Girls' experiences of sexual harassment and violence have increased over the past decade. According to a Child Victim Survey, the amount of sexual violence experienced by girls in the ninth year of school decreased from the late 1980s to 2013, when 5% of girls in ninth year had experienced sexual violence. Since then, the number of cases of sexual violence has started to rise, and 8% of the girls in ninth year reported experiences of sexual violence in 2022. Similarly, the amount of sexual violence experienced by children in sixth year was at its lowest in 2013, after which it has increased from 1% to 3%<sup>45</sup>.

In 2023, about half of girls in years eight or nine of basic education and in the first or second year of upper secondary education had experienced

sexual harassment in the previous 12 months<sup>46</sup>. The most sexual harassment by far was experienced online or over the phone, the second most in public spaces and less often in school<sup>47</sup>. UN Women's survey<sup>48</sup> of sexual harassment also highlighted the harassment experienced by underage girls. Even very young girls are subjected to sexual harassment in everyday and unexpected situations, and this harassment involves the intense sexualisation of a minor by an adult man. Minors also encounter sexual harassment in the workplace, for example by a supervisor or customers in summer jobs, as a babysitter or during a traineeship.

Young people with a foreign background or who are part of a gender or sexual minority or those placed outside their homes clearly experience more sexual harassment and other forms of violence than average<sup>49</sup>. Sexual harassment restricts women and girls' ability to act and move freely and without fear in public spaces, including online environments. It also has serious effects on the mental health, well-being and self-esteem of girls and women. Work to prevent harassment should include getting men and boys to take responsibility for harassment.

Girls with disabilities also have more experiences of sexual violence and sexual harassment than average. According to the School Health Promotion Study, 60–62% of girls with disabilities in all levels of school have experienced sexual harassment. Experiences of sexual violence are about twice as common among girls with disabilities than among other girls: one in four girls with disabilities studying at a vocational institution and one in five girls with disabilities in other levels of school have experienced sexual violence. Sexual violence and harassment experienced by girls with disabilities has also increased significantly between 2019 and 2022<sup>50</sup>.

Experiences of domestic violence are more common among girls and non-binary young people than boys. Girls experience significantly more psychological violence than boys from parents or other carers, and the amount of reported psychological violence has increased significantly in all age groups in the School Health Promotion Study since 2019<sup>51</sup>. Young people who have a foreign background, are part of a gender or sexual minority or are placed outside their homes experience significantly more physical and psychological violence from their parents than average<sup>52</sup>. Girls with disabilities experience violence from parents or other carers at all school levels about twice as often as other girls of the same age<sup>53</sup>, and experiences of different forms of violence are more common among children

and young people with disabilities than among other children of the same age. The violence witnessed or experienced at home is often reflected as violence in young people's own romantic relationships<sup>54</sup>.

Those who leave substitute care places without permission often encounter sexual violence: in a report<sup>55</sup> by the Ombudsman for Children, 29% of the girls interviewed said that they were raped during their unauthorised absence. Of the victims of rape, 91% were girls.

In 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child issued dozens of recommendations to Finland for safeguarding the rights of vulnerable children in particular. The Committee considers it particularly urgent to strengthen non-discrimination work and to intervene in violence against children. The Committee recommends urgent measures to promote the rights of children in substitute care, children with disabilities and asylum seeker and refugee children, among others. Published in 2019, the Non-Violent Childhoods Action Plan contains nearly one hundred recommended actions to prevent violence against children. For example, the recommended actions for combatting sexual violence against children include providing education for conscripts and adding training in the prevention of sexual violence to the basic and supplementary training of public health nurses and midwives.

## **BEING PART OF A MINORITY INCREASES THE RISK OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**

LGBTQI+ people experience significantly more sexual harassment and violence than the majority population. For example, every person belonging to a sexual or gender minority who responded to a survey<sup>56</sup> by UN Women Finland had experienced sexual harassment during their life. According to a survey by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights<sup>57</sup>, one third of respondents who live in Finland and belong to a sexual or gender minority had experienced harassment in the past year. One fifth of the transgender and intersex respondents and about one tenth of the respondents belonging to a sexual minority had experienced physical or sexual violence in the past five years.

LGBTQI+ children and young people also experience more sexual harassment and violence than other children and young people. According to School Health Promotion Studies, one in ten non-binary pupils have experienced sexual violence by their ninth year of school. Of non-binary children in sixth year, 8% reported experiences of sexual violence<sup>58</sup>.

**ACCORDING TO NGOS, WOMEN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED VIOLENCE, FOR EXAMPLE, HAVE BEEN DENIED A RESIDENCE PERMIT AND THE EXPERIENCED DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HAS NOT BEEN TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT IN THE DECISION**



One form of violence against LGBTQI+ people is conversion therapy, which aims to change a person's sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. The objective of the citizens' initiative "Rikkomaton – kielletään eheytyshoidot", launched in 2023, is to ban these therapies. The ban has also been supported by, for example, the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman and other experts. The comprehensive ban would include a ban on arranging trips abroad for conversion therapy and the marketing of conversion therapy. The majority of Parliament's Legal Affairs Committee voted against the proposal, and it is still unclear whether the matter will proceed to examination or legislation.

Immigrant women are 2–4 times more likely to experience violence than women in the native population. The experienced violence is not sufficiently taken into account in the residence permit process. According to NGOs, women who have experienced violence, for example, have been denied a residence permit and the experienced domestic violence has not been taken into account in the decision. No additional resources have been allocated for helping immigrant women who have experienced violence and access to an independent residence permit on the basis of the violence has not been ensured.

According to a report by the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman, the harassment experienced by women with an African background in, for example, the workplace is often a combination of racism and sexual harassment<sup>59</sup>. According to a study by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, people who are part of a sexual or gender minority and have a foreign background face challenges in Finnish society due to their immigrant status and LGBTQI+ identity, especially when these are combined with class, ethnicity or race. Particularly vulnerable are people belonging to several marginalised groups, such as LGBTQI+ asylum seekers, who experience a wide range of discrimination, offensive behaviour and exclusion in different areas of life<sup>60</sup>.

Women with disabilities experience 2–4 times more violence than other women, and the perpetrator of the violence is often someone close to them, such as a spouse or family member. Dependence on the perpetrator of violence is

common, and people with learning difficulties, for example, experience a lot of violence. Women with disabilities are also 4–10 times more likely to experience sexual violence. Elderly women with disabilities often experience domestic violence committed by their own children or spouse<sup>61</sup>.

Girls and women with disabilities who have experienced violence often encounter difficulties when trying to access services. According to a government report<sup>62</sup>, young people with disabilities in all levels of school felt that they had received conversation support less often than other young people of the same age. The accessibility of support services must be improved and the needs of women with disabilities must be better taken into account, for example by securing the funding of the Nollalinja chat service. According to a report<sup>63</sup> commissioned by the Advisory Board for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the gender equality of women with disabilities is poorly realised and they are subjected to more sexual violence than other groups of people. The majority of respondents had experienced discrimination based on disability in the past 12 months.

The length of sentences for sexual violence is still determined in a discriminatory way on the basis of the place where the crime was committed, even though the legislation on rape has been changed to be based on consent. If a rape takes place at an institution (e.g. housing service units for people with a disability), the sentence for it will be shorter than for rapes that happened elsewhere. This puts women with disabilities in an increasingly weak position.

Comprehensive and comparable information on the experiences of violence by women and girls who are part of a minority is needed. Surveys and statistics do not collect comprehensive information about the victim's sexual and gender identity, ethnic identity, immigrant status or disability. On the other hand, when studies also collect information on intersecting differences, the small number of respondents may mean that the responses cannot be generalised to the population level<sup>64</sup>. The collection of information on intersecting differences must be improved in regular surveys as well as in the collection of information by the police and other authorities. On the basis of better research and statistical information, support services can be targeted and discriminatory structures and practices can be eliminated better than today.

Ethnic profiling is discrimination in which authorities, guards or security stewards target searches and surveillance at people on the basis of their ethnic background or, for example, the colour of their skin. This could mean, for example, searching Romani women in shops without a justifiable reason.

Ethnic profiling is prohibited by Finnish law and international agreements. Discriminatory treatment causes experiences of humiliation for victims and undermines trust in the authorities. Several experts have proposed that the prohibition of ethnic profiling should be strengthened in the law and that it should be included in the training of guards and security stewards.

### **SERVICES FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED VIOLENCE ARE STILL INADEQUATE**

People who have experienced domestic violence use health, social and legal services many times more when compared to the rest of the population. According to a study<sup>65</sup> investigating the costs of domestic violence, the health care costs of people who have experienced physical domestic violence are more than two times as large as those of the control group. According to the study, the direct additional costs of physical intimate partner violence experienced by women to health care services are EUR 150 million a year. However, violence has long-term effects on the need for services: it causes depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress, among other things. Experiences of physical domestic violence still affected the need for health care services six years after the violence. Violence experienced in childhood also causes a 50% higher need for health care services in adulthood<sup>66</sup>. Less than 1% of victims are identified in health care services, even though they use services up to 80% more than others.

**ACCORDING TO A STUDY,  
THE DIRECT ADDITIONAL COSTS  
OF PHYSICAL INTIMATE PARTNER  
VIOLENCE EXPERIENCED BY WOMEN  
TO HEALTH CARE SERVICES ARE  
EUR 150 MILLION  
A YEAR.**



The majority of gender-based violence remains hidden from the authorities in Finland. For example, only 7% of women who have experienced sexual violence outside a relationship talk about it to health care services, one in a hundred contact victim support services and 4% report it to the police<sup>67</sup>. There are also deficiencies in the registers of health care and social services

when it comes to recording violence against women. Only less than one tenth of cases of domestic violence that lead to serious injuries are recorded in the registers of health care services or the police. In the registers of social services, information on domestic violence is currently not available at all<sup>68</sup>.

In 2018, the police was contacted about 26,000 incidents of domestic violence via emergency response centres, but only 5,500 crime reports were filed for domestic violence. In research interviews<sup>69</sup>, the police have justified their lack of intervention in domestic violence in various ways, including holding the victim accountable, doubt, limiting the police's job description, passing the responsibility onto social services and practical obstacles. On the other hand, intervention in intimate partner violence was justified on the grounds of empathy and responsibility.

In 2022, Finland's shelters for victims of domestic violence had a total of 5,163 customers, of whom 43% were children. Of the adult customers, 91% were women and 9% were men. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of shelter customers had increased every year since 2015, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of shelter customers decreased in 2020 and 2021<sup>70</sup>. Although the funding for shelters for victims of domestic violence was increased during the 2019–2023 government term, Finland still lacks 59% of the shelter places required by the Istanbul Convention. Shelter operations have severe variation in regional accessibility. In addition to the development of shelter operations, gender-sensitive open services for people experiencing violence should also be developed in the future, as there are currently major issues with their availability. Social work or public mental health services cannot meet the needs of shelter customers' continued support. Instead, they depend on the services of NGOs, the funding of which is currently being subjected to drastic cuts. The spending cuts of wellbeing services counties also reduce the availability of services.

Work has been carried out to promote the accessibility of shelters for victims of domestic violence in cooperation with the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), the Federation of Mother and child homes and Shelters, the Accessibility Center ESKE and the women's network of organisations for people with disabilities. The work included accessibility surveys carried out by shelters, which should have been prepared by 2020 in accordance with the implementation plan for the Istanbul Convention. Parliament has granted funding to increase the number of shelter places and improve the accessibility of shelters. With this funding, shelters have been able to make repairs if deficiencies in accessibility have been observed. However, this funding is no longer being granted, even though there are still deficiencies in accessibility

in many places. According to a study carried out in 2021 by Statistics Finland, 25% of women who had experienced violence reported that their disability prevented or impeded access to a shelter<sup>71</sup>.

In Finland, there are 25 Seri Support Centers that provide forensic examinations, trauma support, psychological counselling and therapy to all people over the age of 16 who have experienced sexual violence. Resources have been allocated to the establishment of new Seri Support Centers in order to create a comprehensive network of Support Centers. People can seek out the services of a Seri Support Center until one month after the experience of sexual violence. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which monitors implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, has recommended that Finland should be more flexible with the one month deadline, as those who have experienced violence typically take a while before seeking help and only a small proportion seek help immediately after the event. There are also regional differences in the service level and resources of the Seri Support Centers. In order to ensure the continuity of operations, it is important that the funding of the Seri Support Centers is secured with a government grant, the same way shelters for victims of domestic violence are funded. Third-sector services and cooperation with NGOs are also essential for the operations of the Seri Support Centers. Support for NGOs must be secured so that the customer care chain is not broken.

The Government's cuts in the funding of NGOs that do low-threshold anti-violence work are a significant threat to the services for women who have experienced violence. The majority of the NGOs receive their funding from the Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations (STEA), whose grants will be cut by a third from 2025. The cuts will affect the operations of Victim Support Finland, Nollalinja and Women's Line, among others. Funding for the work with perpetrators of violence has also been short-term and inadequate, and these services are not provided nationwide. Perpetrators of violence are not obligated to participate in violence prevention and intervention programmes if they are not in the criminal sanctions system, which only a fraction of the perpetrators end up in<sup>72</sup>. The coverage of these services is also under threat because of the spending cuts.

In autumn 2023, NGOs noted that Finland does not have systematic training for professionals in different fields when it comes to violence against women and children<sup>73</sup>. The training depends on each party's own interest, resources and the opportunities given to employees to train on the job. NGOs consider deficiencies in the competence of law enforcement authorities and prosecutors to be particularly serious. Authorities and professionals do not

have sufficient competence to identify the different forms of violence against women. In particular, there are deficiencies in the competence of authorities and professionals when it comes to intersecting differences and the related needs, especially in encountering individuals who belong to several marginalised groups<sup>74</sup>.

In anti-violence work and services, professionals and authorities must ensure that they have a sufficient understanding of violence against women. Mental health competence must also be ensured in all services and the activities of the authorities. Knowledge of the dynamics of violence, identification of different forms of violence and working with victims should be better taken into account in the training of social and health care students and professionals. Anti-violence skills, such as identifying and addressing violence, should be developed as part of the mandatory studies of the social and health care curricula, at maternity and child health clinics and in the regional wellbeing plans of the wellbeing services counties. This should include training on better identification of victims belonging to minorities and the related issues. Discrimination and the fear of discrimination can prevent people who have experienced violence from seeking help and undermine trust in the authorities.

## **GENDER-BASED AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT IS A WIDESPREAD SOCIAL PROBLEM**

Sexual harassment is a widespread social phenomenon that has consequences for the everyday lives of almost all girls and women. According to a study<sup>75</sup> by UN Women Finland, nine out of ten women in Finland have experienced sexual harassment during their lives. This includes unwanted touching, catcalling and inappropriate comments. The majority of harassment occurs in public and semi-public spaces, especially in bars and public outdoor spaces. Sexual harassment has the greatest impact on the lives of people under the age of 35: it causes a feeling of insecurity and leads to restricted movement and the use of safety measures. Experiences of harassment are about 10 percentage points more common among women who belong to a minority than among all women on average. All respondents belonging to sexual or gender minority have experienced sexual harassment during their lifetime.

Sexual and gender-based harassment is also common in Finnish competitive sports. According to a study<sup>76</sup> carried out by the Finnish Center for Integrity in Sports, harassment is related to the cultural structures of sport, such as gender inequality and the status of minorities. The study showed that sport is seen as a masculine space in which the rights of women and minorities are questioned and the masculine discussion culture belittles women, femininity and sexual

minorities. One in three women had experienced sexual harassment. According to the study, the most common form of sexual harassment was harassing speech, which manifests itself as offensive jokes and inappropriate comments. One in four women had experienced this. Experiences of harassment were most common among athletes aged 20–25, and athletes belonging to minority groups experienced significantly more harassment than others. Of those belonging to a sexual minority, one in two had experienced sexual harassment.

Bullying, discrimination and harassment are also common at the club level in the sports of children and young people. In particular, children and young people who are part of a minority repeatedly experience discrimination, harassment and inappropriate treatment in sports, and this problem has not been addressed in sports organisations as seriously as it should be<sup>77</sup>. According to the Children and Youth Leisure Survey<sup>78</sup>, bullying, discrimination and inappropriate treatment are particularly targeted at children over the age of 15 as well as children and young people who feel that they are part of a minority group. For example, about 60% of children and young people who feel that they are part of a sexual minority report bullying and discrimination that occurs sometimes or often in sports.

According to a gender equality survey<sup>79</sup> by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, more than 17% of church employees and less than a tenth of the elected officials have been subjected to insults related to gender or sexuality at work. A tenth of employees and a few per cent of elected officials have experienced physical harassment. In the presentation of the results of the gender equality survey, the responses have not been broken down by legal gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or ethnic background, so the gender-based nature of harassment cannot be fully assessed on the basis of the results.

According to a survey conducted in 2017 by the Finnish Defence Forces, 27% of female conscripts had experienced gender-based harassment, while the figure for male conscripts was 7%. According to the survey data for 2022, the figure for women was 32% (for men, the figure was about 3%). Eliminating harassment requires the development of leadership skills: everyone in leadership positions must be trained to identify harassment and be obligated to intervene in it effectively and promote gender equality through their own actions. One concrete way to do this is to include the reduction of sexual harassment as one of the Finnish Defence Forces' performance targets<sup>80</sup>.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** Carry out a gender impact assessment that takes into account the needs of different groups of women in an intersectional way in the preparation and implementation of the social security reform. Ensure the representation of women's organisations in the Social Security Committee (**Social Security Committee**)
- 2** Assess the fundamental and human rights impacts of cuts in social security. Ensure that everyone is secured an adequate livelihood in accordance with international human rights obligations, if necessary by amending legislation (**Ministry of Social Affairs and Health**)
- 3** Take into account the increased risk of poverty and unemployment in single-parent families in decisions related to families' finances (**Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment**)
- 4** Assess the gender impacts of informal care nationwide (**Ministry of Social Affairs and Health**)
- 5** Ensure that the study grant and the housing allowance for students provide an adequate livelihood during studies (**Ministry of Education and Culture, Ministry of Finance**)
- 6** Enhance the work to combat homelessness among women and families by taking into account the special needs of women and families (**Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment**)
- 7** Implement a comprehensive programme of measures related to pension gender equality to prevent women's pension poverty (**Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment**)

## IN FINLAND, POVERTY IS CONCENTRATED AMONG WOMEN

In Finland, poverty is concentrated among women, especially through single parenthood, old age, care responsibility, foreign background or disability. Poverty is particularly common among single mothers and their children: one in four single-parent households are a low-income household, whereas only 7% of two-parent households are low-income households<sup>81</sup>. Child poverty is most common in single-parent families, families with multiple children and families with young children. Although unemployment is the most significant cause of poverty in the overall population, employment is common in poor families with children and, in particular, in poor single-parent families.

The low-income rate of families with children with a foreign background is almost four times higher than that of children with a Finnish background<sup>82</sup>, and single parenthood is more common among immigrants than among the native population. Those who experienced poverty as children have an increased risk of experiencing mental health problems<sup>83</sup> or becoming homeless in adulthood. The gendered nature of the consequences of child poverty has not been sufficiently studied.

**THE LOW-INCOME RATE OF CHILDREN WITH A FOREIGN BACKGROUND IS ALMOST FOUR TIMES HIGHER THAN THAT OF CHILDREN WITH A FINNISH BACKGROUND, AND SINGLE PARENTHOOD IS MORE COMMON AMONG IMMIGRANTS THAN THE NATIVE POPULATION**

The poverty of working people is often explained by irregular and insecure employment, such as short-term employment, temporary agency work and self-employment. In 2022, 24% of female employees worked part-time, compared to 12% of male employees<sup>84</sup>. The income level of people with a foreign background is significantly lower than that of the native population. The income of African women was only about half of the income of women in the native population<sup>85</sup>.

Among elderly women, having a low income is significantly more common than among elderly men: in 2020, the low-income rate of women aged 76 and over was 23%, while the rate of men of the same age was 12%. At the end of 2022, the average gross pension was EUR 1,658 for women and EUR 2,070 for men<sup>86</sup>. Men's higher pensions are due to longer careers than women and higher pay, which are affected by factors such as the segregation of the

labour market into women-dominated and male-dominated sectors and the uneven distribution of care responsibilities. Depending on the length, number and pay level of the care periods, the impact of care responsibilities on the monthly pension can be up to hundreds of euros<sup>87</sup>. Many elderly women who live alone are at risk of poverty and marginalisation: in the background, there is often a low-paid work history with many interruptions or a role as an informal carer. According to a study, good Nordic practices for reducing the gender difference in pensions include lessening the impact of earned income on pension accrual, increasing the accrual of pension for care work and parental leave, compensation for part-time work and the possibility of sharing or inheriting pensions between spouses<sup>88</sup>.

One third of people of working age with disabilities are at risk of poverty and marginalisation. For the most of them, this is due to low income. According to a report by the Finnish Disability Forum, women with disabilities (57%) experience poverty more often than men with disabilities (47%). Many people with disabilities live on a small pension and/or social security, such as social assistance. Medicine, travel and health care expenses as well as health and social service client charges can take up a large part of their monthly income<sup>89</sup>.

Health problems increase the risk of poverty. People in lower income brackets both feel that their own health is worse and have illnesses more than those in higher income brackets. Many people with long-term illnesses have to make compromises due to the price of medicines and perceive the costs of the illness as a financial burden. Expenses not covered by Kela reimbursement also accrue for people with a long-term illness. The expenses not covered by reimbursement can range from hundreds of euros to more than a thousand euros per month. According to surveys, long-term illnesses are more common among women. For example, in a well-being survey<sup>90</sup> of the capital region, 46% of women in Helsinki had a long-term illness or health problem, compared to 38% of men.

**MEN'S LARGER PENSIONS ARE DUE TO MEN'S LONGER CAREERS AND HIGHER PAY COMPARED TO WOMEN**



## **GENDER EQUALITY ISSUES ARE BEING IGNORED IN THE SOCIAL SECURITY REFORM**

In 2020, a social security reform was launched with the aim of clarifying the social security system, which is considered to be complicated. The reform is being prepared in a parliamentary committee over two parliamentary terms from 2020 to 2027. Changes in social security have significant gendered impacts, but these impacts have practically not been examined at all in the first stage of the Social Security Committee's work. In the work of the Social Security Committee, it is important to assess and take into account gender impacts, especially with regard to vulnerable groups, which includes gender minorities.

From the research, we know that previous changes to financial and social benefits have been targeted differently at different groups of people, depending on gender and age or income level. When deciding which kinds of social security are specific to individuals and which to households and when making changes to social security for families, it must be ensured that they promote gender equality and support different life situations, such as families where the parents are no longer together and families where children spend half of their time with one parent and half with the other<sup>91</sup>. The participation of women's organisations in the work of the committee is a key part of the gender impact assessment and the adoption of gender equality goals as part of the social security reform. This has not yet happened.

## **CUTS IN SOCIAL SECURITY JEOPARDISE THE RIGHT TO AN ADEQUATE INCOME**

From 1 January 2024, numerous cuts in social security were implemented, targeting groups that are already in a vulnerable position. The impacts of the cuts have been found to target especially young people and people who receive several overlapping benefits or who work and also receive social security benefits.

**SOSTE ESTIMATES THAT, AS A RESULT OF THE CUTS IN SOCIAL SECURITY, NEARLY 17 000 ADDITIONAL MINORS WILL FALL BELOW THE POVERTY LINE AND THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIVING IN POVERTY WILL INCREASE BY 68 000**

The gender and human rights impacts of the cuts in social security have not been sufficiently examined. In connection with current social and economic policy decisions and measures that reduce livelihoods, it must be ensured that human rights obligations are fulfilled. SOSTE estimates that, as a result

of the cuts in social security, nearly 17,000 additional minors will fall below the poverty line and the number of people living in poverty will increase by 68,000<sup>92</sup>. Finland has set a target of reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or marginalisation by 100,000 by 2030. One third of these should be children. The cuts have been estimated to increase income disparities and child poverty, which affects single-parent families in particular. The UN CEDAW Committee noted in 2022 that the spending cuts implemented in 2016–2018, such as cuts in social security benefits, affected women relatively more and increased the feminisation of poverty<sup>93</sup>. Cuts in social security and basic services deepen gender inequality, as women are overrepresented in public sector jobs and as users of public services and social security benefits<sup>94</sup>.

In its decision published in 2023, the European Committee of Social Rights stated that the level of social security in Finland is still too low. Finland has already received criticisms from the Committee for its insufficient basic social security. The Committee examined the level of the minimum sickness allowance, parental allowance, rehabilitation allowance, basic unemployment allowance, guarantee pension, labour market subsidy and social assistance. The Committee found that the minimum benefits were too low to cover the basic needs of the benefit recipient as required by the European Social Charter.

The removal of the exempt amount of the basic unemployment allowance and the increase of the basic deductible of the housing allowance weaken the opportunities of low-income women to improve their financial situation through part-time work or separate small jobs. The weaker position of women in the labour market, the gender pay gap and the greater responsibility for unpaid care work borne by women place women in an unequal position when it comes to securing an adequate livelihood.

The discontinuation of job alternation leave and the adult education allowance also particularly affects women and female-dominated sectors suffering from labour shortages. Single-parent families in particular are in a difficult situation when both housing allowances and unemployment benefits are significantly reduced at the same time. Cuts in housing allowance, especially the removal of the deduction for earned income, reduce the incomes of women with partial work ability. The deduction encouraged benefit recipients to also earn small amounts of money or work short hours, and it especially supported women with disabilities whose work ability varies or is declining. Spending cuts targeting single-parent families also affect mothers with disabilities and single parents who do not have the opportunity to compensate for the reduction of income caused by the cuts by working extra hours. Cuts in social security, combined with increases in health and social service client charges and the prices of medicines, are also particularly targeted at low-income people with disabilities.

## SPENDING CUTS LEAD TO A GROWING CARE DEFICIT

Cuts in social welfare and health care services will affect the working conditions and opportunities of employees in the female-dominated care sectors to perform high-quality care work. The spending cuts made and planned by the Government in services and social security are also reflected in the growing burden of care for women in families, including as informal carers. In Finland, the work of caring for close relatives and other loved ones remains mainly the responsibility of women. The gender impacts of informal care increase as the population ages. At the same time, informal care poses a risk of poverty, especially in families that are already in a difficult financial situation<sup>95</sup>.

The planned cuts in services for elderly people have a negative effect on the position of the elderly, as well as on those in work who care for their relatives (mostly women). In practice, this means that women end up with less time, income and pension<sup>96</sup>. The well-being of those who care for their loved ones or manage their affairs must be supported, and solutions that are humane and sustainable from the perspective of gender equality must be developed to allow people to provide high-quality care to their loved ones.

Informal care and other social reproduction can look like an inexpensive solution to decision-makers. It is thought that people will not neglect caring for themselves and their loved ones, even if more of the care responsibility is transferred to families and individuals, often women. However, research<sup>97</sup> shows that cuts in care can have a negative impact on public health, affect people's work ability and shorten life expectancy.

## WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS REMAINS HIDDEN

**ACCORDING TO A SURVEY COMMISSIONED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION AGENCY FOR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS, ONE IN FIVE LGBTI PEOPLE EXPERIENCE OR ARE AT RISK OF HOMELESSNESS DURING THEIR LIVES.**



The number of homeless women has remained almost at the same level for ten years. As the general homelessness has decreased, the proportion of homeless women has increased. Women's experiences of homelessness are gendered, and the homelessness of women and families is not always visible. Romani immigrant women and LGBTQI+ people have a significantly higher

risk of becoming homeless and have difficulty accessing services offered to homeless people. Currently, the resources allocated for women-specific homelessness work are insufficient, even though women need homelessness services that take gender into account. Women's homelessness is not fully reflected in statistics, as it is common for women not to seek out services organised on the basis of the universality principle<sup>98</sup>. The same applies to homeless people belonging to gender and sexual minorities.

Uncertain conditions, immigration, non-registration, lack of identity documents and discriminatory structures have a cumulative impact on the lives of immigrant women with a Romani background. Discrimination affecting access to housing means that Romani women with an immigrant background may stay at unofficial addresses, in emergency accommodation or, in extreme cases, on the street. This affects all aspects of life, from basic needs to access to services and work. Providing emergency accommodation for homeless Romani immigrants is extremely important from the perspective of basic safety and human rights. Continued access to emergency accommodation must be ensured.

Homelessness among gender and sexual minorities is often caused by family conflicts and violence, and hidden homelessness among LGBTQI+ people is common in all EU countries. According to the NGO No Fixed Abode, people who are part of a gender or sexual minority and are experiencing homelessness face special challenges, such as experiences of violence and unsuitable services. For this reason, services are required to provide trust-building communications aimed at LGBTQI+ people in order for them to feel safe to seek out services.

According to a survey commissioned by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, one in five LGBTQI+ people experience or are at risk of homelessness during their lives. One third of trans people are at risk of homelessness at some point during their lives. When comparing all EU Member States, Finnish LGBTQI+ people reported the fourth highest rate of experiences of homelessness<sup>99</sup>. Sexual and gender minorities must be better taken into account in homelessness-related research and services. For example, low-threshold places where it is safe to stay overnight and where it is possible to access multidisciplinary support under the one-stop shop principle are needed.

In the work against homelessness, it is important to take into account the impact of prolonged homelessness on women's mental health in particular and, on the other hand, women suffering from mental health problems as a risk group for homelessness. The availability of free period products through social services, for example, must be improved and the low-threshold washing opportunities for homeless women must be increased.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Include the right to abortion in the Constitution **(Ministry of Justice)**
- 2 Guarantee free contraception for people under the age of 25 nationwide **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 3 Make confirmation of gender possible for minors. Move trans and non-binary identities from the mental disorder classification to the sexual health category in line with the World Health Organisation's ICD-11 classification. Improve access to gender-affirming care for everyone who needs it **(Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 4 Add a third legal gender category to recognise diverse gender identities and promote the rights of gender minorities **(Ministry of Justice)**
- 5 Ban attempts to change a person's sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression (i.e. conversion therapy) **(Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 6 The state must officially apologise and pay compensation to people who have been sterilised against their will on eugenic or social grounds. In addition, the state must apologise and pay compensation to those who have been sterilised by surgery or hormone therapy when the old Act on Legal Recognition of the Gender of Transsexuals was in force **(Prime Minister's Office)**
- 7 Ban medically unnecessary genital-modifying operations and other procedures carried out on intersex children without the child's informed consent **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Ministry of Justice)**
- 8 Fertility treatments must be available to everyone who needs them, regardless of family form or reason for infertility. Increase resources for fertility treatments in public health care **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 9 Reduce the suicide mortality rate of girls and young women and ensure access to treatment **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**

- 10 Strengthen primary care mental health services by implementing a therapy guarantee aimed at the entire population, giving people the right to access effective psychosocial care within a reasonable period of time **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 11 Invest in the resources, quality and quality assessment of eating disorder treatment. Develop preventive measures **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 12 Extend the age range for breast cancer screening to range from 45 years to 74 years in accordance with the Council of Europe's cancer screening recommendations and promote breast self-examination **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 13 Increase and develop breastfeeding counselling. Ensure that all maternity hospitals have been certified baby-friendly and have a breastfeeding outpatient clinic and that their health care personnel have enough time to provide breastfeeding counselling **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 14 Ensure the availability of postnatal physiotherapy in public health care **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 15 Ensure the right of undocumented women and children to also access non-urgent social and health services **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 16 Improve knowledge of the dynamics of violence, the identification of different forms of violence and working with victims in the training of social and health care students and professionals and in social and health services **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 17 Ensure the competence of professionals in the social and health care and education sectors regarding sexual orientation and gender diversity **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 18 Ensure that women-specific illnesses – such as PCOS, endometriosis and vulvodynia – are better identified and treated in public health care. Contraceptives used in the treatment of gynaecological conditions must be Kela-reimbursable whenever they are used to treat a condition **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 19 Ensure that menopause symptoms are identified, correctly diagnosed and addressed with high-quality treatment in public health care and occupational health care **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 20 Ensure an adequate maternity hospital network nationwide **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 21 Reform the Act on Sterilisation in line with other Nordic countries by lowering the age limit to 25 years and removing the consultation session with the spouse from the Act **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**

## GIRLS' AND YOUNG WOMEN'S MENTAL HEALTH IS IN CRISIS

There are many gendered phenomena associated with mental health. Girls and women report more mental health problems and use more mental health services, and LGBTQI+ people are predisposed to mental health problems due to discrimination and minority stress<sup>100</sup>. According to several studies, psychological load and symptoms of anxiety and depression have increased sharply in girls and women. According to the 2023 School Health Promotion Study, about one third of girls experience anxiety or depression that affects their functional capacity<sup>101</sup>. According to a study by the University of Turku's Research Centre for Child Psychiatry, anxiety has increased significantly, especially among teenage girls, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of teenage girls experiencing significant difficulties related to their mood, concentration, behaviour and interaction doubled in just five years: in 2018, the figure was 14.5% and in 2023, it was 28%<sup>102</sup>.

**ACCORDING TO HUS, MEDICATION POISONING CASES AMONG TEENAGE GIRLS STARTED TO INCREASE RAPIDLY AFTER 2017 AND HAVE MULTIPLIED SINCE THEN**



Primary care mental health services should be strengthened by, for example, implementing a therapy guarantee aimed at the entire population, in which case the person would have the right to access effective psychosocial care within a reasonable period of time. It is also important to recognise the mental health challenges of young LGBTQI+ people and the increased risk of suicide. The competence of social and health care as well as education professionals in sexual orientation and gender diversity would improve mental health services for sexual and gender minorities.

Girls have also fallen through the cracks when it comes to neurological diversity and the autism spectrum: boys receive significantly more autism spectrum disorder diagnoses than girls because the screening methods and diagnostic criteria are based on research carried out on boys and men. As for ADHD, men are diagnosed at 18.5 years of age on average, and women at 30 years of age. In women, untreated ADHD often leads to depression, anxiety disorders and other mental health problems.

Self-harm becomes more common in adolescence. The suicide risk of girls and young women remains worryingly high, and access to treatment is insufficient. Hospitals have seen a rapid rise in girls' self-harm: According to HUS, medication poisoning cases among teenage girls started to increase rapidly after 2017 and have multiplied since then<sup>103</sup>. Suicide prevention requires a wide range of preventive measures, including better identification of self-harm and quick access to inpatient care when necessary. However, the National Mental Health Strategy and Programme for Suicide Prevention for 2020–2030 are gender neutral.

The treatment of eating disorders remains focused on weight. The majority of people with eating disorders are of normal weight or overweight and, due to the focus on weight, they are easily left without a diagnosis or adequate treatment. On the other hand, in the case of eating disorder patients who are malnourished, the correction of the nutritional status alone is not a sufficient indicator of recovery from the eating disorder. A care relationship characterised by trust in line with the Current Care Guidelines requires seamless continuity of care across different levels of care and care providers<sup>104</sup>. The treatment of eating disorders also requires determined preventive measures, which includes improving early identification in school health care.

## SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH: BETTER AND MORE NON-DISCRIMINATORY SERVICES ARE NEEDED FOR WOMEN AT ALL STAGES OF LIFE

In Finland, high-quality sexual and reproductive health services in the public health care have traditionally been aimed at pregnant women and women who have given birth through a network of maternity and child health clinics and specialised medical care. However, in a sparsely populated country, the network of maternity hospitals is not dense, and the distance to the nearest maternity hospital is very long in some parts of the country. At the beginning of 2024, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health proposed a significant reduction in the number of maternity hospitals. According to the Federation of Finnish Midwives, this can lead to an increase in unplanned deliveries outside the hospital and deliveries on the way to the hospital, which increases the risks to the safety of the person giving birth and the baby. Medicalisation and induction of labour may also increase further, and trained and experienced midwives may leave the field<sup>105</sup>.

Combined with sexual health advice services, free contraception is effective at preventing sexual health problems. The free contraception trial for under 25s was held nationwide in 2022 and 2023. After the trial, 19 wellbeing services

counties and the City of Helsinki decided to start offering free contraception services for people under the age of 20 or 25. There is regional inequality because the wellbeing services counties can decide independently on the age limit and whether they will offer contraception for free as well as on the provision of sexual health services. Some wellbeing services counties have discontinued free contraception for under 25s because the service is not required by law. The situation is the worst in South Karelia, where free contraception is no longer offered to young people at all<sup>106</sup>.

**ONE IN THREE COMPROMISE ON THE QUALITY OF THEIR PERIOD PRODUCTS AND USE THEM FOR LONGER THAN THE RECOMMENDED PERIOD OF TIME**

Despite its achievements, the free contraception trial did not fully take into account the diversity of young people. Access to free hormone products required the need to prevent pregnancy. For example, a young person who is questioning their gender and wants to use a contraceptive to avoid having their period will have to pay for that contraceptive if they do not need it to prevent pregnancy. Many young people also need a contraceptive as long-term medication for a gynaecological condition. Free contraception could also be used to treat painful and heavy periods. Heavy and painful periods can cause absences from school and pain, as well as predispose people to infertility and sickness absences due to endometriosis later in life.

Other sexual and reproductive health services have been largely left to private service providers and must be paid by the customer. According to NGOs, contraceptives are not always reimbursed by Kela, even if the hormone product is prescribed for the treatment of a gynaecological condition. Conditions affecting women's and menstruating people's sexual and reproductive health (e.g. menstrual disorders, PCOS, endometriosis, vulvodynia, menopause) do not receive equally high-quality treatment in primary health care. Diagnosis may be delayed, the competence of professionals varies and the competence of a gynaecologist might be lacking. Women are forced to seek private services, which makes the realisation of sexual and reproductive health unequal.

Sexual and reproductive health clinics have been proposed to improve diagnosis and access to treatment in primary health care. There is experience of the model in Sweden, for example. According to the Federation of Finnish Midwives, in a "women's clinic", the maternity clinic would be part of a broader sexual and reproductive health clinic and make use of the full professional competence of midwives<sup>107</sup>. The tasks of the sexual and reproductive health clinic would include maternity care; pregnancy prevention; counselling on

abortions, miscarriages, infertility, menopause symptoms and STIs; screening and, in some cases, treatment as well as gynaecological screenings. Promoting sexual and reproductive health and fertility awareness was added to the government decree on maternity and child health clinics, which entered into force in 2023, but this in itself does not address service needs that are not related to pregnancy or childbirth. The work of the sexual and reproductive health clinic would be the responsibility of a midwife or a public health nurse with additional training. According to the EU Directive on midwives, midwives must be responsible for family planning advice and guidance, the diagnosis of pregnancies and the monitoring of normal pregnancies, as well as the implementation of childbirth coaching.

Attention must also be paid to ensuring that the rights of women with disabilities to sexual and reproductive health services and parenthood are realised. Studies have revealed discrimination and lack of accessibility experienced by mothers with disabilities at maternity and child health clinics, such as inappropriate attitudes and treatment from professionals in relation to the family planning, parenting and relationships of people with disabilities.

According to a survey commissioned by Plan, period poverty in Finland is particularly experienced by women and girls who are not employed. One in three compromise on the quality of their period products and use them for longer than recommended<sup>108</sup>. Having insufficient financial resources is particularly common in low-income families with multiple children where more than one person uses period products. The VAT on period products is set to be reduced to 14% in autumn 2024.

The Abortion Act, which dates back to the 1970s, was amended, and the new Act entered into force in 2023. In the future, abortions may be performed until the end of the 12th week of pregnancy solely on the basis of a request by the pregnant person. In the same year, several initiatives were submitted to the councils of the wellbeing services counties, proposing the right of the health care personnel to refuse to treat a patient who wishes to abort if the patient's life is not at risk. However, the councils of the wellbeing services counties do not have the power to decide that part of the personnel can be exempted from the obligation to participate in abortion. This is part of the employer's decision-making power. Abortion is part of the health care duties of a wellbeing services county, and the right to abortion must be implemented equally in all wellbeing services counties.

In its 2020 decision, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that midwives can be expected to participate in abortions as part of their professional duties.

To safeguard the right to abortion, the European Parliament has proposed the inclusion of the right to abortion in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. In France, the right to abortion has already been enshrined in the country's Constitution. Women's organisations have proposed the same in Finland.

The Act on Sterilisation has also been criticised as violating the right to self-determination. According to the Act, a person may be sterilised after turning 30 or after having three children. The law states that an applicant who is married must, if necessary, arrange a joint consultation with their spouse<sup>109</sup>, where it is discussed with the applicant and their spouse which of the two it would be more appropriate to sterilise<sup>110</sup>. In health care, this has been interpreted as the sterilisation of a woman requiring the spouse's approval. According to THL's guidelines, the participation of the spouse in the consultation session is not a prerequisite for allowing a sterilisation. The lack of a written statement by the spouse or a negative opinion of the spouse must not prevent or impede the applicant's sterilisation. To avoid misunderstandings, the section on the consultation should be removed from the Act. In addition, the age limit should be lowered to the age of 25 in line with the other Nordic countries.

In Finland, one in five people of childbearing age experience involuntary childlessness. The number of people affected is estimated to be 300,000. Involuntary childlessness is one of the biggest crises in adulthood, and it affects the body, mind, finances, work and future plans of the person experiencing it<sup>111</sup>. Demand for fertility treatments has increased, and fertility treatments were made available to single women and female couples in public health care in 2019.

Fertility treatments in public health care have long queues, while in private health care the cost of the treatment is an obstacle to many. Fertility treatments must be available to everyone who needs them, regardless of family form or reason for infertility. The resources for fertility treatments must be increased in public health care. The lack of resources in various areas leads to, for example, denying people access to treatment even before they have reached the upper age limit (40 years) because the queues are so long<sup>112</sup>.

### **THE UN COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD IS CONCERNED ABOUT THE RIGHTS OF TRANS AND INTERSEX CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN FINLAND**

In 2023, a new Act on the legal confirmation of gender (the "Trans Act") entered into force, enabling the legal confirmation of gender on the basis of the person's own account. A certificate of infertility is also no longer required.

However, minors were excluded from the reform. According to NGOs, this causes unnecessary delays in the confirmation of gender for many trans adolescents, resulting in considerable stress and difficulties in everyday life. Research shows that the experience of a mismatch between one's gender identity and one's sex assigned at birth can start early, and living with it can significantly impair a child's well-being and expose them to discrimination and bullying. Therefore, the opportunity to confirm one's gender should not be postponed until the person reaches adulthood<sup>113</sup>. In its conclusions regarding Finland, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is also concerned about the mental health of trans children and the discrimination against them. The legislation must be amended so that legal confirmation of gender is possible for people aged 15 or over.

Finland must legally safeguard intersex children's right to bodily integrity and their right to grow up as they are without unnecessary medical procedures. Performing non-essential procedures on intersex children violates the child's right to personal freedom, bodily integrity and privacy. Although the 2019–2023 Government Programme included a commitment to promoting intersex children's right to self-determination, no progress was made in this matter and there is currently no nationwide uniform practice in Finland to protect intersex children's bodily integrity.

In its most recent recommendations to Finland, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child included a reminder that a signatory state must ensure that all unnecessary medical and surgical procedures that modify the gender characteristics of a child are postponed until the child is able to give their informed consent to the procedure. The Committee recommends that Finland provide relevant social, medical and psychological support and services to intersex children and their families. According to the Committee, Finland should also offer compensation and support to intersex children who have been subjected to unnecessary medical or surgical procedures.

### **HEALTH SERVICES FOR UNDOCUMENTED WOMEN MUST BE GUARANTEED**

The rights of undocumented people to health services were increased with legislation that entered into force at the beginning of 2023. The amendment secured also non-urgent care related to pregnancy and childbirth for people within the scope of application of the act. Additionally, it gave undocumented minors the same rights to receive health care services as the people who reside in the municipality. This means that the amendment strengthened the position of women and children in the most vulnerable position. As the amendment has been in effect for a relatively brief period, there is currently a lack of comprehensive data regarding its impacts.

In autumn 2023, the Government prepared a legislative proposal to cancel the expansion of the right of undocumented people to non-urgent care. If implemented, the reduction in health services will lead to even poorer health and chronic illnesses among undocumented people. The change would jeopardise, for example, the health of those who have just given birth and the health of newborns as well as the initiation of breastfeeding. The right of undocumented people to essential health services must be ensured, and the rights of undocumented women and children must be given special attention in this situation. It is also more sustainable from a financial perspective to offer treatment as early as possible before the symptoms worsen and more demanding medical care is needed.

Not all groups considered to be undocumented reside in the country without permission. A significant proportion of Romani women with an immigrant background living in Finland are not covered by the national health insurance system of their home country, which is why they do not receive a European Health Insurance Card and are therefore only entitled to acute care both in their home country and in other EU Member States. The usual health care needs of undocumented people include pregnancy and childbirth-related monitoring and treatment as well as other reproductive and sexual health services. Good care during pregnancy enables a safe delivery and postnatal period as well as reduces the need for special monitoring of the newborn baby. For newborns, the 24-hour period after birth is a critical stage, and it is therefore not possible to postpone the care. Ensuring the initiation of breastfeeding and the health benefits it brings is important for people in vulnerable situations who may not have opportunities to carry out safe formula feeding.

### **WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES AND ACCESSIBILITY OF HEALTH SERVICES**

People with disabilities have the right to equal access to primary health care, as well as to the specialised health care services, rehabilitation services and aids they require due to their disability. There have been deficiencies in health care processes, competence and accessibility. According to a report commissioned by the Advisory Board for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the majority of the respondents felt that access to rehabilitation was poorly realised<sup>114</sup>. According to a survey by the Finnish Disability Forum, women with disabilities also experienced more inappropriate treatment in health services than men. This included their symptoms and pain not being taken seriously and health care professionals speaking to their assistant instead of them<sup>115</sup>. Many women with disabilities have low incomes and health care is expensive, especially for those with multiple conditions, which can jeopardise their livelihood and the treatment and rehabilitation of their illnesses or disabilities.

### **THE PAY AND WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE SOCIAL AND HEALTH CARE SECTOR MUST BE ENSURED IN THE WORK OF THE WELLBEING SERVICES COUNTIES**

In female-dominated care sectors, there have been widespread issues with coping at work, opportunities to have an impact on work and wage development. The pay negotiations for nurses reached an agreement in October 2022, constituting a step towards many goals. For example, the pay of practical nurses will increase by 17% over five years on the basis of the negotiated pay deal<sup>116</sup>.

Care work has typically been seen as an inexhaustible resource that can always be made more efficient<sup>117</sup>. However, there are already signs of failure: the industry is suffering from a shortage of nurses, the work overload of nurses, lack of time to carry out tasks and even risks to patient safety. In the Finnish tripartite system, gender equality issues related to pay and working conditions in female-dominated sectors are easily forgotten due to questions of competence between the government and the labour market organisations. Hence, the problems related to pay and working conditions in female-dominated sectors have not been resolved<sup>118</sup>.

In the health and social services reform and in the work of the wellbeing services counties, it is important to take equal pay and women's terms of employment and working conditions into account. Of the more than 200,000 employees and public officials transferred to wellbeing services counties, 84% are women, which means that the reform has significant impacts on gender equality. The same pay must be given for the same work of equal value regardless of gender and previous organisation. The harmonisation of pay is necessary to bring the pay of employees moving from different municipalities to the same level. In addition, the wellbeing services counties must comply with the Equality Act, which means, among other things, the obligation to draw up a gender equality plan, conduct a pay survey and ensure equal representation in the composition of different bodies<sup>119</sup>. According to THL's data collection<sup>120</sup> in spring 2024, 13 of the wellbeing services counties are drawing up or have already drawn up a gender equality and non-discrimination plan. The largest number of concrete measures have been aimed at managing operations and organising services.

In the work of the wellbeing services counties, it is important to dismantle gender segregation in the social and health care sector and promote women's career development and working conditions. Improving working conditions is also an essential part of achieving gender equality in the world of work and ensuring health services. The stress caused by the COVID-19 crisis in the social and health care sector has exacerbated the already challenging working conditions, and the uncertainty related to the changes may have a negative effect on well-being at work. In the long term, larger and sufficiently funded employer organisations can improve job security, opportunities for professional development and work-life balance, which in turn supports the coping of the personnel<sup>121</sup>.

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## EDUCATION AND TRAINING

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** Solve the crisis in early childhood education and care by improving the pay and working conditions of early childhood educators to match the responsibility and demands of the work **(Ministry of Education and Culture, Prime Minister's Office, labour market organisations)**
- 2** Add mandatory gender equality and non-discrimination training as a key part of early childhood educator and teacher training and teachers' further training **(Ministry of Education and Culture)**
- 3** Reduce group sizes in early childhood education and care. Investigate the national implementation of the local nursery principle and promote free early childhood education and care **(Ministry of Education and Culture)**
- 4** Actively dismantle gender stereotypes, racism, heteronormativity and segregation through gender-aware pedagogical early childhood education and care, curricula, teaching, learning materials, guidance counselling and periods of work experience **(Ministry of Education and Culture)**
- 5** Ensure the right of undocumented children to attend school **(Ministry of Education and Culture)**
- 6** Record practical measures for promoting gender-aware education and teaching and dismantling segregation in the operational gender equality plans of early childhood education and care and educational institutions. Make training available for drawing up plans and actively monitor their implementation **(Ministry of Education and Culture)**
- 7** Schools and educational institutions must improve their efforts to combat harassment based on gender and gender identity, gender diversity and gender expression. Schools and educational institutions intervene in sexual harassment and bullying and ensure the high quality of sexuality education **(Ministry of Education and Culture)**
- 8** Support critical (social) media literacy and the ability to identify material produced by artificial intelligence more strongly in education and training **(Ministry of Education and Culture)**
- 9** Address girls' increased anxiety and learning difficulties by establishing girls' resource clubs, conversation support and other targeted support **(Ministry of Education and Culture)**

- 10** Improve supported learning and learning Finnish as part of one's studies for immigrant girls **(Ministry of Education and Culture)**
- 11** Develop local and national youth work for Romani young people to improve the hobby opportunities and inclusion of Romani young people. Increase the participation of young people in accordance with the recommendations of the Romani policy **(Ministry of Education and Culture)**
- 12** Establish an accreditation scheme promoting gender equality in higher education institutions in accordance with the KOTAMO project **(Ministry of Education and Culture)**
- 13** Define early childhood education and care as an educational right in the Constitution **(Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Education and Culture)**
- 14** Enable schoolchildren's statutory morning, afternoon and holiday activities in line with the Swedish fritidshem model **(Ministry of Education and Culture)**
- 15** Restore the obligation to draw up site-specific non-discrimination plans in early childhood education and care. Also restore the municipality's obligation to draw up shared non-discrimination plans for the providers of family daycare and municipal open early childhood education and care **(Ministry of Education and Culture)**

### THE CRISIS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION HAS FAR-REACHING CONSEQUENCES

High-quality early childhood education and care is a child's right and an essential prerequisite for parents' employment, but it has fallen into a crisis, especially in the capital region and the largest cities. NGOs and early childhood education and care professionals have repeatedly expressed concerns about the inadequate resourcing of the sector. Early childhood education and care professionals feel that the shortage of teachers and the excessive workload are major challenges in the sector. These are caused by the lack of appreciation for the sector, low pay and shortcomings in well-being at work and working conditions<sup>122</sup>. In the current situation, highly educated experts are not paid enough considering the demands of their work, vacancies cannot be filled and providers have not succeeded in reducing group sizes. The situation is further exacerbated by the export-driven pay model planned by the Government, which may prevent increasing the pay level in female-dominated sectors, such as early childhood education and care<sup>123</sup>.

The crisis has escalated particularly in large cities, where resource and staff shortages are particularly acute. Correcting the situation requires significant

investments in improving the sector's appreciation, pay and working conditions to ensure the quality and accessibility of early childhood education and care and the working conditions of professionals in the sector.

The crisis in early childhood education and care has far-reaching impacts on society. In addition to making it harder to ensure children's well-being, learning and sense of security, the crisis also makes it difficult for parents of young children, and especially mothers, to work, advance their careers, study and find work. Of the respondents to the Mothers in Business (MiB) membership survey<sup>124</sup>, 96% consider a small enough group size to be an important quality factor in early childhood education and care, but only 61% feel that this is sufficiently realised. About 20% of the respondents to the membership survey have been worried about their child's well-being in early childhood education and care while at work. In addition, one in six respondents reported that they have shortened their working day for reasons related to the quality or availability of early childhood education and care. Similarly, one in six stated that they have postponed their return to work for reasons related to the quality or availability of early childhood education and care.

### **EDUCATIONAL SEGREGATION IS A MAJOR CHALLENGE**

In Finland, many fields of study have developed into strongly male- or female-dominated fields<sup>125</sup>. The gender segregation of education in Finland is also strongly reflected in international comparisons. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), gender segregation in education in Finland is the second most severe in the EU<sup>126</sup>.

The choices of subjects made in basic education and the skills and interest in different subjects that have developed during this time affect educational and career choices after basic education, strengthening the gender segregation of education and the labour market. Segregation makes the labour market less flexible and affects the distribution of economic power. For example, Finland has the lowest number of women in STEM in the Nordic countries. In Sweden, 36% of STEM students were women in 2021, compared to 27% in Finland<sup>127</sup>. The segregation of education does not show any signs of declining. Instead, according to EIGE, it has increased slightly since 2020.

The segregation of fields of study is increased by ethnic and cultural stereotypes in guidance counselling. According to a report by the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman, guidance counselling in schools steers girls with an African background in particular towards vocational training in social and health care instead of university studies, for example, regardless of the pupil's

academic performance and own interests<sup>128</sup>. According to a doctoral thesis<sup>129</sup> completed at the University of Helsinki, education contributes to increasing racialised and gender segregation in education and the labour market through discriminatory guidance counselling practices, among other things.

Educational segregation requires action at all levels of education and training and from all actors. What is needed is a national programme to dismantle and prevent segregation that would create permanent structures and resources for dismantling segregation. The state and the municipalities should implement the programme at all levels of the education system. Periods of work experience and educational institutions' guidance counselling should be developed in order to dismantle segregation. Attention should also be paid to the low representation of men in female-dominated sectors and especially at lower levels of education<sup>130</sup>. Within the framework of the law, one option is to favour applicants of the minority gender in educational forms tailored for changes of career. This would promote the dismantling of gender segregation as well as educational gender equality more broadly.

**ACCORDING TO A REPORT BY THE NON-DISCRIMINATION OMBUDSMAN, GUIDANCE COUNSELLING IN SCHOOLS STEERS GIRLS WITH AN AFRICAN BACKGROUND IN PARTICULAR TOWARDS VOCATIONAL TRAINING IN SOCIAL AND HEALTH CARE INSTEAD OF UNIVERSITY STUDIES, FOR EXAMPLE, REGARDLESS OF THE PUPIL'S ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND OWN INTERESTS.**



### **GENDER EQUALITY WORK IN SCHOOLS AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE REQUIRES RESOURCES AND THE OPPORTUNITY TO WORK IN PEACE**

Gender equality work in schools and early childhood education and care is an important tool for promoting the rights of women and girls, but it faces constant challenges. According to a report by the Finnish National Agency for Education, 40% of schools lack a statutory gender equality and non-discrimination plan, which would include a situation survey and an action plan. This shows that schools need more guidance and support in the local implementation of gender equality work. Consultation with young people

in the gender equality and non-discrimination planning of schools is also important so that the plans meet their needs and experiences<sup>131</sup>.

In summer 2024, the Government proposed removing the non-discrimination planning obligation in early childhood education and care. According to the proposal, the obligation to draw up site-specific non-discrimination plans and the municipality's obligation to draw up shared non-discrimination plans for family daycare and open municipal early childhood education and care activities would be removed. Although the law obligates the authorities to continue promoting non-discrimination, the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman, the Ombudsman for Children, the Ombudsman for Equality and many experts see the abandonment of planning as weakening the position of children at risk of discrimination. Without site-specific plans, non-discrimination work can easily remain abstract, and day-to-day concrete work and the involvement of personnel, children and parents in promoting gender equality may suffer.

In relation to this theme, the Council for Gender Equality maintains the [tasa-arvokasvatuksessa.fi](https://tasa-arvokasvatuksessa.fi) portal, which offers resources to support gender equality education. The Finnish National Agency for Education also provides schools with tools to support gender equality work, and the topic has been taken into account in the further training funded by the agency. However, the challenge is organising further training for teachers more broadly so that the know-how is also spread to others than those who are already interested in the topic. One significant problem is that training organisers are unable to reimburse the participants' loss of earnings or substitute costs, which makes it difficult for teachers in many municipalities to participate in training. In addition, further training aimed at the development of the operating culture and professionalism requires sufficient time; brief information sessions are not enough to develop in-depth understanding and competence.

### **SEXUALITY EDUCATION IS NOT IMPLEMENTED EQUALLY**

Comprehensive sexuality education is required by law in Finland. Sexuality education must strengthen the right to self-determination, promote gender equality and non-discrimination, dismantle heteronormativity and respect diversity. It must be based on impartial and scientifically valid information and be available to everyone. Correct information and the right services have a direct impact on young people's ability to plan their future. Young people's deliveries and abortions are less common in Finland than in other countries. When sexuality education was abandoned as a compulsory subject due to the depression in 1994, the number of abortions among young people began to increase and, for example, chlamydia infections doubled. The trend started to decline after health education, and sexuality education as part of it, returned to schools in 2002.

**PUPILS AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES MAY BE EXCLUDED FROM SEXUALITY EDUCATION DUE TO INADEQUATE ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION METHODS OR PREJUDICE.**

Comprehensive sexuality education is currently not implemented equally in Finland. Sexuality education is promoted in separate policies and programmes. Education on the diversity of gender and sexual orientation aimed at primary and secondary schools has increased, but schools have few resources for this, and NGOs cannot provide education without funding. The curricula lack age-specific goals for cross-curricular sexuality education that would take gender diversity and minority groups sufficiently into account. According to NGOs, it is necessary to improve the sexuality education competence of professionals in early childhood education and care, schools, educational institutions, youth work and the social and health care sector. The basic training of professionals providing sexuality education does not sufficiently support high-quality sexuality education, and the supplementary training is not comprehensive enough. There are also challenges in treating pupils in a non-discriminatory way: pupils and young people with disabilities may be left without sexuality education due to inadequate alternative communication methods or prejudice.

Body-emotion education was strengthened as part of the national core curriculum for early childhood education and care in 2022. Body-emotion education is taken into account in the new core curriculum by, for example, steering children's age-appropriate curiosity about sexuality and the body in a respectful manner, instructing children to respect and protect their own and others' bodies, and encouraging children to ask questions and answering children's questions. However, there is a great need for training in body-emotion education for professionals. This should be mentioned in the binding early childhood education and care content plan, and training should be available free of charge to the personnel during working hours.

The implementation of the amended legislation on sexual offences requires a change in attitudes. Consent should be set as the starting point for sexuality education and, for example, campaigns should be carried out to promote a culture of consent. To prevent violence against girls and women with disabilities, efforts must also be made to ensure that girls and women with disabilities receive the necessary know-how about violence, how to protect themselves from it, the different forms of violence and the special characteristics of violence against women with disabilities. This can be achieved by adding information to school materials on the sexual rights of people with disabilities, violence against people with disabilities and how to protect oneself from it.

Some teachers refuse to provide sexuality education on the grounds of the age of the children or the fact that some parents may have a negative attitude towards sexuality education. This leads to a situation where legally mandated gender equality and non-discrimination is not realised for many minority children and young people. Some MPs and local councillors seek to restrict sexuality education, particularly with regard to sexual orientation, gender diversity and gender, and norm awareness. This is part of a wider movement against human rights, which undermines schools' opportunities to organise comprehensive sexuality education and challenge discriminatory structures in society.

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## THE WORLD OF WORK

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Assess the gender impacts of employment policy and increase the employment rate, particularly for people with disabilities, Romani women and other vulnerable people. Address discrimination against women with minority status by improving the identification of competence, identifying and eliminating structural discrimination, changing attitudes and developing the family leave system (**Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment**)
- 2 Add a definition of work of equal value to the Equality Act and introduce a method for assessing job demands across different sectors and collective agreements. Monitor the implementation of the EU Pay Transparency Directive. Lower the threshold of 30 employees in the Equality Act and the Non-Discrimination Act (**Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, labour market organisations**)
- 3 Ensure that the recommendations on equal pay issued by the Council of Europe's European Committee of Social Rights to Finland in summer 2020 are implemented (**Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, labour market organisations**)
- 4 Investigate how many cents per a man's euro women with disabilities and immigrant women earn (**Ministry of Social Affairs and Health**)
- 5 Set numerical targets for monitoring women's and men's share of family leave, evaluate the results at the end of the government term, and continue taking action until care responsibilities are evenly distributed. Develop the basis for determining daily allowances for parents so that the either the annual income or the income of the previous tax year would be the basis for the allowance (**Ministry of Social Affairs and Health**)
- 6 Amend the labour legislation so that the use of pregnancy and family leave does not negatively affect the continuation of a fixed-term employment relationship. Promote a more even distribution of parenting costs by granting the spouse of the non-custodial parent the right to temporary care leave (**Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment**)

- 7 Amend the Adoption Act to take better account of different family situations, and grant those in the adoption process or undergoing fertility treatment the same protection against discrimination as pregnant women. The prohibition of discrimination must be included in the Equality Act **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment)**
- 8 Ratify the ILO's Maternity Protection Convention **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 9 Amend the Occupational Safety and Health Act to impose a stricter obligation on the employer to prevent and intervene in sexual harassment and inappropriate treatment, and include an obligation for the employer to ensure the end of harassment without delay in the Act. Make neglecting this obligation punishable as an occupational safety and health violation **(Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment)**
- 10 Guarantee immigrants who care for children at home access to integration training and other integration-promoting measures, while also ensuring the children's access to early childhood education and care **(Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment)**
- 11 Improve the pay and working conditions of the female-dominated care sector by, among other things, increasing opportunities to influence one's own work **(labour market organisations, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Prime Minister's Office)**
- 12 Amend the Act on Reindeer Herders' Stand-In Help so that reindeer herders have the right to stand-in help for the care of a sick child, pregnancy, childbirth and parental leave, the care of a child or adoptive child, the care of a child under the age of three and in the case of other barriers to working **(Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment)**
- 13 Collective agreements must take into account the situations of a diverse range of families by, for example, granting care leave for a sick child to all parents, taking into account crisis situations in the family better than currently and taking into consideration different family forms in the paid shares of family leave **(labour market organisations)**

Gender equality in the world of work has not been significantly advanced in recent years. The most substantial reform has been the family leave reform implemented by the Government between 2019 and 2023. The number of parental leave days increased, the flexibility of the use of leave increased and the reform sought to take even better account of different forms of families. For the first time, the reform provided both parents with an equal parental leave quota. However, efforts to eliminate pay discrimination and unjustified pay gaps by enhancing pay transparency encountered obstacles early on, when the Confederation of Finnish Industries withdrew from the tripartite working group that was drafting the amendment. Ultimately, the government parties also failed to reach an agreement on pay transparency, leading to the suspension of the legislative proposal's preparation<sup>132</sup>. The tripartite working group also made no headway on achieving the objectives set in the 2019–2023 Government Programme, including preventing pregnancy discrimination and improving the employment security for those returning from family leave. In fact, the working group did not even begin drafting the necessary amendments.<sup>133</sup>

The current Government Programme contains provisions that affect women's position in the labour market, and it is important to monitor their gender impacts. For example, in the future, fixed-term employment contracts could be offered without a justified reason, and employees could be dismissed without a significant reason. Pregnancy discrimination and family leave discrimination are common in Finland, and these changes may increase discrimination against women in the labour market.

### **THE WORLD OF WORK IS HIGHLY SEGREGATED**

The labour market in Finland is characterised by severe gender segregation in various occupations and sectors. Less than 10% of all employees work in occupations with at least 40% of both women and men. It is essential to address gender segregation by sector as early as possible and to promote girls' access to STEM sectors and boys' access to care and education sectors. According to the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare's Dismantling Segregation project, decision-makers must commit to tackling gender segregation. Key stakeholders include labour market organisations, employers' associations and trade unions, companies, TE offices and other job search and recruitment agencies. Cooperation between actors in the labour market, education and early childhood education and care must be improved.

The measures to dismantle segregation must have both short-term and long-term goals, and they must be concrete and measurable. Progress

towards these goals should be regularly monitored and their impacts continuously assessed. The current state of segregation and the measures to address it should also be reflected in the strategies of the key ministries, municipalities, regions and wellbeing services counties. Finland needs a long-term structure that spans across government terms and works to dismantle gender segregation in the labour market and in education at the national and regional levels.

### **WOMEN FIND EMPLOYMENT IN FINLAND BUT HAVE TO SETTLE FOR INSECURE EMPLOYMENT AND INADEQUATE WORKING CONDITIONS**

In Finland, the gap between the employment rates of men and women is one of the smallest among the EU Member States. The employment rate of women is significantly above the EU average, while the employment rate of men is only average in the EU. In certain age groups, the employment rate of women is even higher than that of men, which is exceptional at the EU level<sup>134</sup>. Women's part-time work is also less common in Finland compared to other EU Member States.

In Finland, mothers of young children typically take full family leave before returning to full-time work. Part-time work among mothers of young children is more common in Sweden, for instance<sup>135</sup>. In Finland, the employment rate of mothers (79%) is actually slightly higher than that of women without children (78%). Between 2019 and 2021, the employment rate of mothers increased by 2.6 percentage points. The increase was particularly noticeable in women with children under the age of three<sup>136</sup>.

The employment rate of immigrant women has improved for several years. The employment rate of women born abroad rose from 53% in 2016 to 68% in 2022. The most rapid improvement in employment was seen among women born outside the EU, rising from 45% to 64% between 2016 and 2022<sup>137</sup>. While the employment rate of immigrants in 2016 was still below the average level of both Sweden and the EU, by 2022 it had surpassed both. This means that, in Finland, the employment rates of both women born in Finland (79%) and women born abroad (68%) are significantly higher than the EU average. This applies to both women born in the EU (76%) and women born outside the EU (65%). Meanwhile, the employment rate of both men born in Finland and men born abroad is only average in the EU and even slightly below the OECD average<sup>138</sup>.

Fixed-term employment contracts are more common among women in Finland compared to the EU average. The current government is planning a

reform that would allow fixed-term employment contracts without a justified reason. If enacted, the reform would weaken gender equality and women's position in the labour market, as women are more frequently employed in fixed-term positions than men. The employment situation of women belonging to a gender minority is particularly precarious: only 26.5% of women in a gender minority reported being in permanent employment in 2020, compared to 85% of the entire Finnish population.

### **GENDER INCOME GAPS ARE HIGHER THAN THE EU AVERAGE**

According to an analysis by Statistics Finland, the median net income of women is approximately 16% lower than that of men. The greatest differences in personal incomes are found in the 65–77-year-old age group, where women's incomes were one fifth lower than men's. The smallest gaps are among young adults, who also have the lowest incomes. Only in the age group of 18–20-year-olds do women's personal net incomes slightly exceed those of men. The proportion of women is clearly the largest in the low- and middle-income groups (except for the lowest five per cent), while the higher the income group, the larger the proportion of men. Among the top 5% with the highest incomes, only one in four is a woman. Of women with a foreign background, 28% ranked in the bottom 10% of Finns measured by personal income<sup>141</sup>.

**IT IS NOT KNOWN HOW MANY CENTS PER A MAN'S EURO WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES EARN**



In 2020, the European Committee of Social Rights stated in its pay equality decision concerning Finland that Finland has not sufficiently promoted pay equality. The gender pay gap (16% in 2020) was still above the EU average, and the segregation in education and work that sustains the pay gap had only deepened<sup>142</sup>.

The impact of pay inequality on the incomes of women with disabilities has not been adequately studied. A working woman earned 84.4 cents in to the euro 2022<sup>143</sup>. However, the amount of the euro of a working woman with disabilities is unknown, let alone for women with disabilities who have been dependent on social security throughout their adult lives. It is difficult to find out about the pay and poverty of women with disabilities if the statistics are gender neutral. So far, there has not been enough funding to determine the amount of the euro of a woman with disabilities.

In accordance with the recommendations of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, Finland must reassess the current measures aimed at reducing and eliminating the gender pay gap<sup>144</sup>. The recommendations call for the identification of measures that can lead to measurable progress within a reasonable timeframe. Finland should also ensure that the recommendations issued to Finland by the Council of Europe's European Committee of Social Rights in summer 2020 are implemented. According to the Committee, the Equality Act of Finland should also require organisations with fewer than 30 employees to draw up a gender equality plan. Of Finnish businesses, 93% are micro enterprises with fewer than 10 employees, which employ up to 23% of the Finnish workforce.

However, the most important thing in promoting pay equality is to increase pay transparency<sup>145</sup>. The legislative preparation for the pay transparency reform should continue. The reform is supported by, for example, the recommendations issued by the UN CEDAW Committee and the EU Pay Transparency Directive. The Government Programme implements the EU Pay Transparency Directive at the minimum level. According to trade unions, pay equality will deteriorate further if the export-driven pay model is implemented<sup>146</sup>. Once the model has been implemented, the female-dominated sectors will not be able to get larger pay increases as they will be tied to agreements in the male-dominated export sector.

## **MANY WOMEN CONTINUE TO FACE DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORLD OF WORK**

Pregnancy discrimination and family leave discrimination are central problems that impede gender equality in the world of work. These are the issues that the Ombudsman for Equality is most frequently contacted about<sup>147</sup>. Most of the discrimination has been experienced by women, but some fathers have also faced family leave discrimination.

**APPLICANTS WITH A SOMALI BACKGROUND ARE IN A PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE POSITION IN THEIR JOB SEARCH, WITH ONLY 99 OUT OF 1,000 APPLICATIONS LEADING TO AN INVITATION FOR AN INTERVIEW.**



According to a survey<sup>148</sup> conducted by Mothers in Business (MiB), more than a third of members have experienced discrimination related to their family situation in the world of work. Discrimination typically occurs in job-seeking situations, where candidates are questioned about family-related plans or the recruitment process is even halted after a pregnancy is revealed. Another typical issue is challenges in job security as well as career and pay development upon returning from family leave. Based on the experiences gathered from MiB members, returning parents often find their competence underestimated, they may be subjected to derogatory comments behind their backs, and are frequently denied opportunities for career advancement or training. For example, a person returning from family leave might no longer be offered tasks of the same level as before or their former duties have been transferred to substitutes.

According to a recent thesis<sup>149</sup>, pregnancy discrimination remains prevalent. Of the survey respondents, 28% reported having experienced discrimination<sup>150</sup>. The most common cases of discrimination involved the termination or non-continuation of a fixed-term employment contract due to pregnancy or family leave. Other common cases included discrimination in recruitment, a reduction in the level of job responsibilities or the "disappearance" of work tasks after family leave and being denied benefits or promotion. Nearly 70% of those who had experienced discrimination reported they had not taken action. Fear of consequences is a major factor that causes victims to resign themselves to the situation. The potential costs and complexity of legal proceedings are also significant barriers to taking action. Discrimination cases are often settled privately, with the victim signing a non-disclosure agreement, which means that many cases never come to light.

There is also discrimination related to the adoption process and fertility treatments that is comparable to pregnancy or family leave discrimination. However, the current legislation does not clearly address this issue<sup>151</sup>. Fertility treatments and the adoption process may be revealed to the employer through, for example, sick leave certificates. Some people who are involuntarily childless suspect that they have been discriminated against in recruitment, in making their employment relationship permanent or in promotion. Talking about the adoption process in the workplace can also lead to discrimination that is comparable to pregnancy discrimination, and dismissal can jeopardise the continuation of the adoption process. Individuals going through the adoption process or undergoing fertility treatment must receive the same protection against discrimination as those who are pregnant, and the prohibition of discrimination must be included in the Equality Act.

Women also experience discrimination in the world of work due to factors such as age, ethnic or linguistic background, citizenship status, sexual orientation, gender identity, illness or disability.

Extensive research shows that there is a significant ethnic and partly gender-based hierarchy in the Finnish labour market, which is particularly evident in the discrimination experienced by immigrant women. Discrimination extends to job seeking, where foreign names, especially non-European ones, have a significant impact on employment opportunities.

According to a study by the University of Helsinki, applicants with a Somali background are particularly vulnerable, with only 99 out of 1,000 applications leading to an invitation for an interview (compared to 390 out of 1,000 applicants with Finnish names being invited to an interview)<sup>152</sup>. This finding is supported by a study by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights: 31% of Muslim women wearing a scarf or a face veil have experienced discrimination due to their ethnic or immigrant background<sup>153</sup>. According to a survey<sup>154</sup> conducted by the Academic Engineers and Architects in Finland TEK and the Union of Professional Engineers in Finland, 43% of international female experts in the field of technology have experienced discrimination in recruitment, with respondents from Africa and Asia particularly affected.

Multiple discrimination – where factors such as ethnic background, religion and gender are intertwined – is common but not always recognised. According to a report by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 25% of respondents who belong to an ethnic minority or have an immigrant background felt that they were discriminated against on two or more grounds, and those who belong to visible minorities, such as Romani people and Africans, are more likely to face multiple discrimination than others<sup>155</sup>. According to the experiences of Romani women, entering the labour market or advancing one's career is challenging due to prejudices and racist structures. In particular, unskilled Romani women with an immigrant background who do not speak the local language are excluded from the labour market<sup>156</sup>.

Multiple discrimination must be identified in the world of work and concrete measures must be taken to remove barriers to employment. Reducing employment discrimination and other forms of discrimination also supports better mental health, as structural as well as direct and indirect discrimination expose people to minority stress and thereby harm their mental health.

The results of a survey<sup>157</sup> conducted by Finnish LGBTQI+ organisations show that people who belong to a gender minority continue to experience discrimination

in their job search and in the workplace due to their identity, and their income level is significantly lower than that of the rest of the population. Of trans women, 53% report that they have experienced discrimination in the world of work. On the other hand, the survey responses show an increase in the positive and encouraging trend already observed in the previous survey. The discrimination against gender minorities is influenced, among other things, by the cis-heteronormative atmosphere of the workplace, where it is assumed that everyone is heterosexual and that everyone's gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth. Members of minority groups may be unjustifiably disadvantaged in, for example, recruitment, and they may be subjected to different kinds of bullying, such as misgendering.

**OF TRANS WOMEN, 53% SAY THAT THEY HAVE EXPERIENCED DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORLD OF WORK.**

According to a Nordic survey, the physical facilities at workplaces, such as gender-neutral toilets and changing rooms, are important factors in improving the work environment for trans people. In addition, formal dress codes can sometimes be discriminatory and have a negative impact on the well-being of trans people. The support of supervisors and colleagues plays a significant role in creating an atmosphere that takes trans people into account. However, supervisors often lack knowledge about trans issues. Practices that promote non-discrimination in the workplace play a key role in creating a safe work environment<sup>158</sup>.

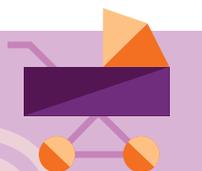
Disability is one of the most common grounds for discrimination brought to the attention of the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman<sup>159</sup>. Current legislation, the practices of the authorities and attitudes create barriers to the labour market. Much of the discrimination experienced by women with disabilities in the world of work is due to societal structures and prevailing attitudes. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires Finland to compile and maintain appropriate statistical and research information related to disabilities. According to Article 27 of the Convention, States Parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others. This includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to people with disabilities. According to NGOs, this article is poorly implemented in Finland.

The participation of people with disabilities in the workforce is lower than that of others. Women with disabilities experience discrimination in their job search, in the workplace and in career progression, and their work does not always correspond to their level of education or provide an adequate livelihood. Inaccessible workplaces exclude many women with disabilities from work, and the Accessibility Decree only addresses physical accessibility. Combining benefits and pay would support the working of people with disabilities, but the Government's spending cuts make part-time work less financially viable. The employment of people with intellectual disabilities is particularly challenging; there are 30,000 people with intellectual disabilities in Finland, of whom about 600 are in paid employment, even though an estimated 3,000 could find employment with the right support<sup>160</sup>. Many people with intellectual disabilities perform productive work in work activities without pay, only receiving an allowance.

### **UNEQUAL DIVISION OF CARE WORK IN FAMILIES IS AN INVISIBLE GENDER EQUALITY PROBLEM IN THE WORLD OF WORK**

The Finnish world of work is characterised by an unequal division of family leave compared to the other Nordic countries. The family leave reform, which came into force in 2022, made the family leave model more equal and flexible than before. The amount of earnings-related family leave increased and an equal share of it was allocated to both parents. In other words, earmarked leave was introduced for fathers without reducing the leave available for mothers. It can be said that the reform was implemented with gender equality and the well-being of families as the main priorities, rather than as an employment measure<sup>161</sup>.

**THE FAMILY LEAVE REFORM IMPLEMENTED IN 2013 SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASED THE USE OF THE QUOTA FOR FATHERS FOLLOWING PARENTAL LEAVE.**



In Finland, women's employment rate is close to that of men, but women take the lion's share of family leave. Even after the reform, the transferable days are still mostly being used by mothers. The unequal use of family leave deepens pay gaps, hinders women's career progression, reduces women's pension accrual and exposes women to discrimination in the world of work regardless of their family status. In particular, child home care allowance, which was not addressed in the family leave reform, has been regarded as a poverty trap for women, as research shows it lowers a person's income level for the rest of their life. Child home care allowance has been a popular form of support in Finland: about 90% of families use it at least for some time to

care for children under the age of three at home, even though the use of the allowance has been declining for several years – with the exception of the COVID-19 year of 2020. Women who are not employed use the child home care allowance for longer than others<sup>163</sup>.

Following the family leave reform, it is important to monitor the use of family leave by fathers over the longer term. The family leave reform implemented in 2013 significantly increased the uptake of the father's quota following parental leave. The highest relative growth was seen in low- and middle-income fathers, who had previously taken less family leave than high-income fathers<sup>164</sup>.<sup>165</sup> According to calculations by Suomen Ekonomit, following the 2022 family leave reform, both parents should use their earnings-related parental leave if the family wants to optimise their financial situation.

Although financial reasons can be assumed to be important to families, a cultural and attitudinal shift is also needed, both within families and in the world of work. The encouragement and practices of workplaces could lead to a significant increase in the amount of family leave fathers take. Pregnancy and family leave discrimination must be addressed, substitutes must be arranged for fathers taking leave and a family-friendly culture must be fostered. Incentives can also be incorporated into collective agreements: the transfer of months of family leave to mothers could be reduced by recording the paid periods of family leave under the collective agreement as equal for both parents.

According to the Ombudsman for Equality, some collective agreements violate the prohibition of pay discrimination in the Equality Act, as they provide men with a shorter period of paid parental leave than women who have given birth. Some collective agreements also contain provisions that exclude those on family leave from receiving bonuses and allowances not paid in each pay period or limit the entitlement to such bonuses and allowances for those on part-time family leave<sup>166</sup>.

Women are also mainly responsible for childcare in families with school-age children. According to the Family Federation of Finland's Family Barometer, women have more often than men reduced their working hours, changed jobs, received less demanding tasks and not applied for a more demanding job due to caregiving responsibilities. Women make up 95% of the recipients of partial care allowance, which allows working hours to be reduced to care for a child who is in the first or second year of school. In Finland, there are no nationwide holiday activities organised for children, while in Sweden, work-life balance is supported by fritidshem activities. Fritidshem is open in the morning and afternoon, also during holidays. Every child is guaranteed access to the activities from pre-primary education age to the end of sixth year.

## THE IMPACTS OF PANDEMIC MEASURES IN THE WORLD OF WORK AND IN FAMILIES VARIED

The impacts of COVID-19 varied from family to family. Some mothers reported that their time spent together with the family had increased and everyday life had calmed down, while about half of mothers reported increased worry and stress and a weakening of the support network<sup>167</sup>.

Although the COVID-19 crisis put a burden on mothers especially early on and exposed inequality in the division of care work, fathers also increased their share of childcare. These effects were not as significant or as permanent as in countries where early childhood education and care and schools were closed for very long periods. Parents of children under the age of three were also able to rely on child home care allowance, and fathers also made use of this option more than usual. The increase in the use of the child home care allowance caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was only temporary<sup>168</sup>. So far, the COVID-19 pandemic has not led to a major shift towards a more equal division of work between mothers and fathers in unpaid care work<sup>169</sup>.

### WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT FELL SHARPLY AT THE BEGINNING OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.



The COVID-19 crisis also highlighted the segregation in the Finnish labour market. Women's employment fell sharply at the beginning of the pandemic. The working conditions and well-being at work of women employees were also negatively affected. For example, women who were unable to work remotely experienced more difficulties in coping at work.

In particular, the female-dominated sectors of medical care, education and hospitality involved mostly on-site work. Women entrepreneurs were also more likely to be concerned about their financial situation and ability to cope than male entrepreneurs<sup>170</sup>. However, women's employment recovered faster than men's once the acute crisis was over. The growth rate of women's employment outpaced the growth of men's employment in 2021.

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## DECISION-MAKING

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** Set gender quotas for the boards of directors of all listed companies. Do not use the Member State option of the EU Directive on listed companies. Add a recommendation on board diversity to the Corporate Governance Code **(Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 2** Mainstream the gender perspective in legislative proposals and the state budget. The Government must commit to gender budgeting in accordance with the recommendations of the "Tasa-arvoa talousarvioon" project **(Prime Minister's Office, all ministries)**
- 3** Increase funding for human rights organisations and NGOs providing low-threshold services **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Ministry of Education and Culture)**
- 4** Strengthen the position and resources of gender equality authorities (the Ombudsman for Equality, the Gender Equality Unit, the Council for Gender Equality, the National Non-Discrimination and Equality Tribunal). Ensure the independent status of the Ombudsman for Equality **(Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Finance)**
- 5** Look into improving the legal protection of victims of discrimination and amend the Equality Act so that it can also be applied to cases of intersectional discrimination. Grant the Ombudsman for Equality an independent right of action in matters related to gender discrimination **(Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Ombudsman for Equality)**
- 6** Restore THL's Centre for Gender Equality Information **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health)**
- 7** Work in cooperation to promote Romani and Sámi women's active role in society and participation in municipal and national decision-making **(Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Ministry of Justice, Association of Finnish Cities and Municipalities)**
- 8** Strengthen the opportunities of immigrant women to participate in public life. Political parties must set numerical targets for the participation of immigrant women at all levels of decision-making and take **(all political parties)**

- 9** Guarantee the participation of women with disabilities in politics and public life as well as in the management of public matters on an equal footing with others in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities **(Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment)**
- 10** Ensure that the information on candidates' election funding disclosures is reported by gender **(Parliament, National Audit Office of Finland, Statistics Finland)**
- 11** Ensure that the municipalities' exercise and sports resources – such as sports facility construction, time slots and grants – are distributed equally between the genders **(Ministry of Education and Culture)**
- 12** Introduce a quota of 50% for women in all decision-making bodies in sports and exercise and limit the number of terms of office to a maximum of three **(sports organisations)**

### GENDER EQUALITY IS ADVANCING IN POLITICS, BUT HIERARCHIES PERSIST

In the Parliament elected in 2019, the proportion of women was higher than ever before: 47%. All five parties of the 2019–2023 Government were led by women, with the majority of ministers being women (63%) and the key ministerial posts of Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance being held by women, which was also noted internationally<sup>171</sup>. Significant progress was also made in terms of better gender balance in committees and chairperson positions<sup>172</sup>. Of the current Members of Parliament, 45.5% are women<sup>173</sup>. Three of the four parties in Government are led by a woman, and Finland also got the second female Minister for Foreign Affairs in its history.

However, the gendered nature of politics and the gendered division of labour in politics are structural problems that cannot be resolved over one or two government terms. The division of committees into male- and female-dominated ones persists from one parliamentary term to the next<sup>174</sup>. Between 1999 and 2019, the Agriculture and Forestry Committee and the Defence Committee always had a male majority, while the Social Affairs and Health Committee, the Education and Culture Committee, and the Employment and Equality Committee most often had a women majority. As of early 2023, the Agriculture and Forestry Committee and the Defence Committee still had a male majority, and the Social Affairs and Health Committee continued to have a female majority. Gender segregation was also evident in the gender distribution of committee chairs. Between 2007 and 2019, the Finance Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee, the Defence Committee and the Commerce Committee were always chaired by a men across the four surveys conducted during the period under review.

**DURING THE GOVERNMENT NEGOTIATIONS IN 2023, ATTENTION WAS ATTRACTED BY THE FACT THAT NO WOMEN PARTICIPATED IN DISCUSSIONS INCLUDED IN THE NEGOTIATIONS THAT WERE RELATED TO HYBRID THREATS, CYBERSECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICY.**



According to a 2022 survey<sup>175</sup>, women and men have significantly different experiences of working as MPs. Female MPs rate their opportunities to influence their own party's agenda and policies as more limited than male MPs do, regardless of parliamentary group, age or experience. Female MPs also report feeling more pressure and less frequently receive sufficient support. In addition, female MPs still feel more often than male MPs that their original ideas are stolen or that they are interrupted when they speak. Many female MPs reported that their ideas are only taken seriously when they are presented or supported by a male MP.

The political representation of immigrant women and women with a foreign background remains low. According to a report<sup>176</sup> by the Migration Institute of Finland, people with a foreign background are considerably underrepresented in municipal elections and councils, particularly in big cities. In 2021, the proportion of candidates with a foreign background was just under 3%. People with a foreign background made up just under 1% of the elected candidates, while they make up about 8% of the total population. On the other hand, although the majority of candidates and elected representatives in municipal elections are men, the gender distribution of foreign-language candidates is more even than that of Finnish-speaking candidates. In the 2021 municipal elections, about 45% of foreign-language candidates were women, compared to about 40% of Finnish-speaking candidates. Immigrant women are also relatively active as voters. According to one study<sup>177</sup>, the voter turnout among women with a Russian, Estonian or Swedish background is higher than among the men, while the voter turnout of women with a Somali background is the same as that among the men.

### **MEN CONTINUE TO LEAD BUSINESS AND SECURITY POLICY**

As employees, women participate in business and the world of work at a relatively high level when compared internationally, but companies are still mainly led by men. According to a survey<sup>178</sup> of female executives by the Finland Chamber of Commerce, there has been slight annual growth in the number of women in the senior management of companies for several years. In 2011, only 18% of the board members of listed companies were women, but in 2020 that figure had risen to 30%. In 2023, the proportion of women

on the boards of listed companies increased to 33%. Large cap companies had the highest proportion of women at 37%. Two Finnish listed companies had elected an all-male board of directors. Only 10% of chairs of listed company boards are women, and just nine women hold the position of CEO in a Finnish listed company (7%).

The EU Directive on improving gender balance on corporate boards (2022) requires listed companies to have boards where at least 40% of positions are held by the underrepresented gender. The directive allows for the postponement of the application of the rules if the proportion of women is at least 30% and applies only to large listed companies. In order to promote gender equality, it would be important to raise the level of requirements, extend the obligations to smaller listed companies and not to use the postponement option. In small listed companies, the proportion of women on boards of directors is the smallest (5%)<sup>179</sup>.

Decision-making is the most unequal in security and defence policy. During the government negotiations in 2023, attention was attracted by the fact that no women participated in discussions included in the negotiations that were related to hybrid threats, cybersecurity and defence policy<sup>180</sup>. According to an analysis by EIGE, Finland has few women in decision-making positions in its defence forces when compared to other European countries – even at best, the proportion of women is only about a fifth of the EU average<sup>181</sup>. Consequently, increasing the representation of women in decision-making positions in the Finnish Defence Forces was one of the five recommendations selected by the UN CEDAW Committee for expedited monitoring of implementation in 2022.

Even in sports and exercise, women are not equally represented in decision-making<sup>182</sup>. The majority of the board members of sports organisations are men (67%), and the chairs of the boards are also mainly male. The gender distribution of board members varies greatly between organisations, but the boards of sports federations, in particular, appear to be heavily male-dominated. On the boards of sports federations, women comprised 28% the board members and 16% of the chairs. About two out of five members and one in ten chairs of the boards of other organisations promoting physical activity and regional sports organisations were women. There are more women than men on the boards of the Olympic Committee and the Paralympic Committee, and the chairperson positions were also equally distributed.

In line with the recommendations<sup>183</sup> from the European Commission's High Level Group on Gender Equality in Sport, the National Council of Women of Finland has raised quotas as one potential measure to address the gendered

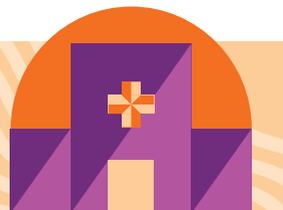
structures within sports organisations and promote gender equality. Quotas have been used in sports organisations successfully for several years in Norway, Sweden and Germany.

### **MEN STILL MAKE UP THE MAJORITY OF VICARS**

Women have been ordained as ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland for more than 35 years. According to statistics from 2020, women make up more than half (61%) of the Church's parish pastors and but only about one in four (27%) vicars. Currently, three of Finland's 10 bishops are women, marking a historic first. However, the position of Archbishop has always been held by men. In countries like Sweden and Norway women have long been part of church leadership, including roles such as Archbishop (Sweden) and Chair of the Bishops' Conference (Norway)<sup>185</sup>.

According to the Church's gender equality survey<sup>186</sup>, gender is a significant factor in the experience of inequality, for example in career progression and pay. Discussions around the gender and duties of ministers is still ongoing in parishes. About one quarter of the respondents had experienced situations in which a parish member refused to attend a service led by a female minister and less than a fifth reported instances where visitors requested gender-based shift arrangements for the ministers. In some parishes there is also teaching that claims that a woman cannot serve as a minister.

**MORE THAN HALF OF THE MINISTERS OF THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF FINLAND SUPPORT ALLOWING SAME-SEX COUPLES TO BE MARRIED IN A CHURCH**



The rights of LGBTQI+ people also divide the church. More than half of the ministers of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland support the marrying of same-sex couples in the church. On the other hand, 40% of ministers oppose it<sup>187</sup>. The Church's official stance is that only a woman and a man may be parties to a marriage in a church wedding.

### **STRENGTHENING SÁMI PEOPLE'S RIGHT TO SELF-DETERMINATION IN DECISION-MAKING**

The Government appointed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Concerning the Sámi People in 2021. The Commission's objective is to collect and highlight Sámi people's experiences of the actions of the Finnish state and authorities and their impact on the Sámi people, and to make

this information visible. The Commission's work ended up in a crisis due to a lack of trust and an extension of the Commission's term was sought. The Commission has been given additional time until 2025, after which it will submit its final report to the state.

The Act on the Sámi Parliament is also under reform. The UN's Human Rights Committee, Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and Human Rights Council have issued recommendations to Finland on the reform of the Act on the Sámi Parliament and, in particular, the provisions on the electoral roll to better uphold the indigenous people's right to self-determination.

### **THE ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENT, HATE SPEECH AND TARGETED ONLINE HARASSMENT WEAKEN WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING**

Anti-gender rhetoric, which is on the rise at all levels of society, poses a threat to the rights of women and sexual and gender minorities. The anti-gender movement consists of many different actors belonging to the far right and conservative communities and aims to deprive sexual and gender minorities as well as women and girls of existing rights and prevent the establishment of new ones. Many authoritarian states support this global movement and use anti-gender rhetoric in both foreign and domestic policy. According to a report published in June 2021, the European anti-gender movement received at least USD 707.2 million in funding from various European, Russian and US sources between 2009 and 2018<sup>188</sup>. Anti-gender actors justify their actions by claiming that changing traditional gender roles and so-called "family values" will destroy social order. Anti-gender rhetoric seeks frame "gender ideology" as the enemy. In addition to the rights of women, girls and LGBTQI+ people, the movement threatens the realisation of democracy, sustainable development and a free civil society.

**MANY AUTHORITARIAN STATES SUPPORT THIS GLOBAL MOVEMENT AND USE ANTI-GENDER RHETORIC IN BOTH FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC POLICY**

In Finnish public debate, the extent of the anti-gender movement and its role as both a challenger of gender equality and the rule of law and a security threat have not been sufficiently taken into account. In its report<sup>189</sup> to the Foreign Affairs Committee in spring 2022, Parliament's Employment and Equality Committee noted that the Government's report did not take into account the significance of gender equality issues in assessing the impacts of Russia's war of aggression. The Employment and Equality Committee

considered it important that the anti-gender movement's influencing attempts in Finland and Russia's strong commitment to the movement's objectives be identified as part of preparing for crises, hybrid attacks and influence operations. Among other things, the Committee noted that disinformation promoting anti-gender thinking aims to cause division in society and erode the values to which Finland is committed. Despite the detailed treatment of the anti-gender movement, the Foreign Affairs Committee did not include the issue in its later report<sup>190</sup>, in which it discussed the change in the security situation in Finland resulting from Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

Hate speech and targeted online harassment against women is becoming more common and affects women's well-being, freedom of expression, political participation and democratic decision-making. In particular, women who make their voice heard online, female decision-makers and journalists are targeted and subjected to systematic harassment, shaming and threats. According to a study by Statistics Finland, harassment experienced online is more likely to change the behaviour of women than men and causes women to, for example, avoid or reduce participation in discussions on social media<sup>191</sup>.

According to a study<sup>192</sup> of hate speech directed at decision-makers, two-thirds of decision-makers estimate that hate speech has increased in recent years. Of the female municipal decision-makers, 42% reported being subjected to hate speech. Of men, 28% had experienced hate speech. Compared to the hate speech experienced by male politicians, the hate speech faced by female politicians more often took the form of a threat. Respondents' loved ones were also regularly subjected to hate speech. Hate speech also affects women's desire to participate in politics and their health and feeling of security more negatively than men's. About half of the female municipal decision-makers who had experienced hate speech reported a decrease in their desire to participate in decision-making (about a third of men reported this). Many of the respondents said that hate speech and harassment have led them to consider quitting politics or no longer participating in politics.

People in political positions may use targeted online harassment or hate speech against, for example, journalists or activists, negatively affecting the conditions for democratic participation in society. In 2023, a motion was put forward in Parliament to limit the parliamentary immunity of MPs in cases of hate speech. According to the Constitution, an MP must not be charged in a court of law nor be deprived of liberty owing to opinions expressed by the MP in the Parliament or owing to conduct in the consideration of a matter. Charging and deprivation of liberty are only possible when five sixths of the MPs have voted to support them. According to the motion, MPs cannot have a special right to engage in hate speech in the Plenary Hall.

The recommendation of the previous NGO Beijing Report (2019) for MPs to distance themselves from hate speech has not been fully implemented. In autumn 2023, the current government published a communication to promote non-discrimination and gender equality in response to a discussion sparked by the old racist writings of government ministers. The communication included a few anti-racist measures, but it was also criticised as lacking in concrete measures. Within the framework of the communication, the Government prepared an action plan for combatting racism that attracted widespread criticism from NGOs. Among other things, the action plan was criticised for emphasising one minority group and ignoring others: for example, Islamophobia was not mentioned as a form of racism and no actions were proposed to address it. According to the criticism, the action plan does not intervene much in structural discrimination and emphasises surveys, even though there is already a lot of research-based knowledge about racism.

Current legislation is not effective at preventing hate speech and targeted online harassment, as gender-based hate speech, racist hate speech against individuals and targeted online harassment have not been criminalised. The actions listed in the Government's non-discrimination communication do not include legislative amendments to address racist hate crimes or hate speech. In March 2024, several NGOs demanded legislative amendments from Finland to combat racism and provided a reminder that Finland has often received recommendations from international bodies that monitor human rights conventions to combat racism and hate crimes<sup>193</sup>.

Finland is at risk of being taken to the Court of Justice of the European Union if Finnish national legislation does not fully implement the EU rules on combatting racism and xenophobia. According to the Commission, the investigation of crimes related to racism and xenophobia without a report or accusation made by the victim has not been ensured in Finland. Racist hate speech targeted at individuals has also not been criminalised in Finland. The working group that was preparing the matter was closed down in spring 2024, and a rapporteur was appointed to replace it.<sup>194</sup>

## **MAINSTREAM GENDER EQUALITY IN FOREIGN POLICY**

Although Finland has emphasised the rights of women and girls in its foreign policy for years, no Finnish government has yet declared that it is pursuing feminist foreign policy. During the previous government term, it was investigated how gender equality is implemented in the various areas of foreign policy. The report<sup>195</sup> highlighted that security and trade policy is still perceived as gender neutral, while in development policy and human

rights policy, the rights of women and girls are at the heart of the work. The fact that foreign policy that talks about gender equality is linked to security policy<sup>196</sup> that stays silent about gender equality has become particularly clear with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and Finland's NATO application. Although the Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan, which combines gender equality and armed crises, has been a key tool in Finland's foreign policy, including its previous NATO cooperation, gender equality issues or women's rights were not addressed at all in Finland's NATO application process. During the parliamentary debate, bringing up gender equality issues was left to the Employment and Equality Committee<sup>197</sup>.



**EQUALITY ISSUES OR WOMEN'S RIGHTS WERE NOT ADDRESSED AT ALL IN FINLAND'S NATO APPLICATION PROCESS**

In the 2019–2023 Government Programme, human rights-based policy was placed at the heart of foreign and security policy, which was also reflected in the foreign and security policy report published in 2020. The objective was a more systematic integration of human rights in all areas of foreign policy. In 2022, the Advisory Board for International Human Rights proposed that Finland adopt a Feminist Foreign Policy that promotes gender equality and women's rights in a human rights-based and intersectional way<sup>198</sup>. Before the parliamentary elections in 2023, the NGOs communicated that the gender equality strategy in foreign policy would make Finland one of the leading countries in gender equality<sup>199</sup>.

According to the current Government Programme, Finland continues to promote the rights of women and girls in an intersectional way in its foreign policy. On the other hand, the Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy published in 2024 abandons the human rights-based approach. Instead, the report talks about value-based realism. According to the report, Finland will continue to defend sexual and reproductive health and rights and fund the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and the UN Population Fund.

## **MAKING GENDER BUDGETING A PART OF PUBLIC DECISION-MAKING**

Gender budgeting is an internationally recognised strategy for promoting gender equality. The method ensures that the state budget supports gender equality and does not increase inequality. This approach is already on the agenda of the OECD, IMF and G7 countries, for example. The idea behind gender budgeting is to analyse and assess how public funds and taxation are actually divided between the genders. The aim is to identify and correct any gender biases that make some people benefit more from the budget than others. This requires the collection and transparency of data that is broken down by gender so that the impact of the budget can be analysed transparently.

In contrast to Finland, several countries that make use of gender budgeting have passed laws about it<sup>200</sup>. In Finland, according to a regulation issued by the Ministry of Finance, the main title justifications of the draft budget must include summarised reviews of activities with significant gender impacts. The Ombudsman for Equality drew attention to the fact that, in the 2024 budget, the measures to achieve the gender equality targets mentioned in the main title justifications were often unclear and, in some cases, gender equality is mentioned as being promoted without any concrete measures being provided<sup>201</sup>.

In Finland, work must be actively done to mainstream the gender perspective in legislative proposals and the Budget. The Ombudsman for Equality therefore proposes that more detailed guidelines on gender budgeting be drawn up for administrative branches in the same way as a guide on gender impact assessment in legislative projects has been drawn up<sup>202</sup>. Recommendations and good practices can be found by looking into the experiences of other countries, which the OECD has compiled in one place, and the recommendations of the "Tasa-arvoa talousarvioon" report commissioned by the Government<sup>203</sup>.

Gender budgeting promotes a fair distribution of resources and ensures that the needs and circumstances of all genders are taken into account in the budgeting process. When gender disparities are brought to light, governments can allocate resources more precisely to promote gender equality. This means that resources can be allocated more effectively to the areas where they will have the greatest positive impact on people's well-being.

## BETTER TOOLS FOR THE OMBUDSMAN FOR EQUALITY TO DEAL WITH INTERSECTIONAL DISCRIMINATION

The Non-Discrimination Act and the Equality Act do not mention multiple or intersectional discrimination. In practice, however, the Non-Discrimination Act can also be applied in cases of multiple discrimination where gender is one of the grounds for discrimination<sup>204</sup>.

According to the Ombudsman for Equality, special attention should be paid to matters concerning intersectional discrimination, to which only the Non-Discrimination Act is currently applied, even if one element of the intersectional discrimination is gender, gender identity or gender expression<sup>205</sup>. This significantly limits the opportunities of the Ombudsman for Equality in both monitoring discrimination situations and promoting gender equality. As a result, the Equality Act cannot be applied in cases of gender-related intersectional discrimination, and the Ombudsman for Equality is not able to address suspected discrimination in these situations. It should also be possible to apply the Equality Act in cases of gender-related intersectional discrimination, in which case the Ombudsman for Equality would also have competence in these matters.

In its 2022 report to parliament<sup>206</sup>, the Ombudsman for Equality highlighted several amendment needs in the Equality Act related to the monitoring of non-discrimination, the effectiveness and availability of legal remedies and the adequacy of the obligations to promote gender equality. The Equality Act should therefore be amended to improve the promotion of gender equality and the adequacy of non-discrimination monitoring and legal remedies.

The Ombudsman for Equality has also recommended an independent right of action for the Ombudsman in matters related to gender discrimination. According to the Ombudsman for Equality, the competence of the authorities monitoring the Equality Act and Non-Discrimination Act should be as clear and uniform as possible<sup>207</sup> so that the system of legal protection is as clear as possible from the perspective of victims of discrimination, allowing victims of discrimination to have access to their rights regardless of the grounds for discrimination.

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## HUMAN RIGHTS AND ARMED CONFLICTS

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Strengthen the Ministry for Foreign Affairs' resources and expertise for the development of 1325 work and increasing the funding of Finland's 1325 network **(Ministry for Foreign Affairs)**
- 2 Reverse the cuts in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs' support to NGOs **(Ministry for Foreign Affairs)**
- 3 Increase the number of women in foreign and security policy positions in the EU and NATO **(Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Defence Forces)**
- 4 Clearly take into account gender and gender identity, LGBTQI+ people, people with disabilities and gender-based violence in asylum criteria and processes. Increase the capacity of professionals and authorities to recognise violence against women (including female genital mutilation and honour-related violence). All women and girls, regardless of residence status, are offered information about their rights and services **(Ministry of the Interior)**
- 5 Make family reunification easier and cancel the legislative amendments impeding it **(Ministry of the Interior)**
- 6 Finland must promote the ensuring of safe and legal routes for people fleeing persecution and conflict **(Ministry of the Interior, Ministry for Foreign Affairs)**
- 7 Strengthen the gender perspective in peace mediation, peace processes, the security sector and crisis management and the increase the participation of women in peace negotiations. Mainstream gender equality in all foreign and security policy **(Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Ministry of the Interior)**
- 8 Increase Finland's transparency in the implementation of arms trade agreements **(Ministry of Defence, Ministry for Foreign Affairs)**
- 9 Assess the implementation of the Youth, Peace and Security (2250) National Action Plan and extensively involve young people as well as women's and non-governmental organisations in the preparation of the next action plan **(Ministry for Foreign Affairs)**
- 10 Restore the funding of peace organisations **(Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Justice)**

- 11 Repeal Section 148, subsection 1, paragraph 6 of the Aliens Act that allows foreigners to be denied admittance or stay if there is a suspicion that they may sell sexual services **(Migri, Ministry of Justice)**
- 12 Commit to foreign policy promoting gender equality and women's rights in a human rights-based and intersectional way and ensure that clear and sufficient resources have been allocated for foreign policy promoting gender equality **(Ministry for Foreign Affairs)**
- 13 Improve the protection of civilians – especially women, girls, LGBTQI+ people and people with disabilities – in crisis areas and wars **(Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Defence Forces, NATO)**
- 14 Strengthen the support for women human rights defenders in Afghanistan and women's ability to provide for their families. Push the EU and the UN, especially in the UN Human Rights Council, to establish a permanent human rights monitoring mechanism in Afghanistan **(Ministry for Foreign Affairs)**
- 15 Include the gender perspective in reconstruction processes in Ukraine and support local women's organisations **(Ministry for Foreign Affairs)**
- 16 Support an unconditional and permanent ceasefire in Gaza, promote the delivery of essential humanitarian aid especially to vulnerable groups and take into account women's specific needs, such as maternity health **(Ministry for Foreign Affairs)**
- 17 Introduce a humanitarian visa for human rights defenders so that it enables protection of, for example, activists of women's organisations and female journalists **(Ministry for Foreign Affairs)**

### ARMED CONFLICTS AND DEEPENING MILITARISATION THREATEN THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

The Beijing Platform for Action requires states to reduce human rights violations in conflict situations, increase the number of women in conflict resolution at the decision-making level and increase their contribution to promoting a culture of peace. Finland has committed to promoting the protection of women's human rights in both peace and conflict in numerous international commitments. However, the war in Ukraine and Finland's NATO membership have also reinforced the trend of militarisation and rearmament in Finland. As geopolitical tensions increase, the multilateral system's ability to influence conflicts has weakened, and the debate in Finland is also strongly

focused on the security of states. The search for peaceful solutions to conflicts has fallen by the wayside, and it has even been proposed that the rules-based international order should be changed. Since international human rights treaties specifically protect vulnerable people, this trend is of particular concern from the perspective of women's and girls' rights.

**SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICTS HAS SEEN A WORRYING INCREASE: THE NUMBER OF CASES VERIFIED BY THE UN INCREASED BY ALMOST 50% FROM 2022**

Most of the world's conflicts are still internal conflicts within states. In these conflicts, armed violence and human rights violations are committed by the national army, paramilitary forces and informal and private armed actors, often with the specific aim of causing suffering for the civilian population of the opposing side and destroying living conditions. Armed conflicts have a strong impact on the civilian population, especially girls and women, through, among other things, sexual violence, being forced to flee the area and environmental crises. Sexual violence in conflicts has seen a worrying increase: The number of cases verified by the UN increased by almost 50% from 2022<sup>208</sup>. In an unstable world, safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable groups becomes even more important. The special needs of women and girls must be taken into account in humanitarian aid, crisis management operations and Finland's advocacy work in international organisations.

The rules-based international order and the international community have failed to protect civilians and civilian targets in armed conflicts. An estimated 3,238 women and girls have been killed and 4,872 have been injured during the first two years of Russia's illegal and full-scale invasion of Ukraine. There have been many reports of sexual crimes committed by Russian forces in Ukraine. These crimes are systematically used as a weapon of war. Collecting evidence and responding to these crimes is important so that the systematic nature of these acts can be investigated and the systematic sexual violence can be recognised as a crime against humanity in the International Criminal Court. Girls and women represent 56% of those in need of humanitarian aid who have been displaced internally in Ukraine. According to UN Women, the war is making it difficult to access social, mental health and sexual and

reproductive health services, among other things, and has increased the risk of gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, human trafficking and intimate partner violence<sup>209</sup>. Finland is currently preparing a reconstruction plan for Ukraine that lacks a gender perspective. Finland must include the rights of women and girls in the planning and implementation of the reconstruction of Ukraine in accordance with the principles of the Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy.

Following the deadly attacks by Hamas in October 2023, Israel's full-scale military attack on Gaza has led to a major humanitarian disaster threatening the lives of more than two million people in Gaza. According to UN Women, more than 10,000 women in Gaza were killed in the first six months of the military attack. Among these women, there are an estimated 6,000 mothers, and 19,000 children have been orphaned. Women who survived Israel's bombings and ground operations have been forced to flee their homes, have been widowed and suffer from hunger. More than a million women and girls in Gaza are suffering from catastrophic hunger and have little access to food, clean drinking water, functioning toilets or running water, which poses life-threatening risks<sup>210</sup>. According to the UN, both Hamas and Israeli security forces have used sexual violence against civilians.<sup>211</sup>

Finland must support an unconditional and permanent ceasefire in Gaza and consistently promote the delivery of essential humanitarian aid, particularly to vulnerable groups, taking into account the specific needs of women. In November 2023, 79 employees of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs presented a letter to Minister for Foreign Affairs Elina Valtonen expressing their dissatisfaction with Finland's Middle East policy and their concern that Finland did not do enough to prevent civilian suffering in Gaza and has not consistently demanded that the rules-based order be respected.<sup>212</sup> In October 2023, Finland abstained from voting in the UN on a resolution on an immediate humanitarian ceasefire. According to Minister for Foreign Affairs Valtonen, the decision was made because the text did not specifically condemn the Hamas attack.

Finland's decision to suspend the payment of support to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in January 2023 due to suspected links with Hamas was also criticised. In January 2024, 45 Finnish NGOs expressed in their statement that it is totally disproportionate to punish more than two million Gaza residents whose survival depends directly or indirectly on the Agency's activities because of allegations related to 12 UNRWA employees<sup>213</sup>. Since then, the support has been almost completely restored.

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in autumn 2021 widely shocked women's rights defenders around the world. The Taliban removed almost all rights from women, to the point that the women's oppression meets the criteria of gender apartheid, according to the UN. The country's human rights defenders are in danger of being killed and half of Afghans suffer from hunger.

For many years, Afghanistan was Finland's most significant partner country in development cooperation. Finland supported, among other things, sexual and reproductive health services, the country's independent human rights commission and the Women, Peace and Security work in the country. Women's human rights defenders from Afghanistan, interviewed<sup>214</sup> by the National Council of Women of Finland, hope that Finland will be more active on behalf of Afghan women in international forums, especially in the EU and the UN Human Rights Council. The interviewees consider it particularly important to increase the efficiency of nationwide human rights monitoring. Only with reliable documentation can the Taliban, who hold power, be held accountable for their actions. Finland can also, among other countries, put pressure on the Taliban to open schools and universities to girls and allow women to work. Finland suspended bilateral development cooperation with Afghanistan in 2021.

### **RESOLUTION 1325 GUIDES FINLAND'S WORK IN CONFLICTS BUT IS LIMITED TO SOFT SECURITY**

Finland published its new Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan in spring 2023<sup>215</sup>. The Action Plan is the fourth in Finland. It takes women's diversity into account in a more intersectional way than the previous action plans and mainly sees women as active actors rather than passive targets of protection. The Action Plan also takes into account the change in the operating environment, in particular the need to promote the Women, Peace and Security theme in Finland's actions in NATO. However, it is worth noting that the Women, Peace and Security resolution and the Youth, Peace and Security resolution were not mentioned in the current Government Programme, and the Government has cut the funding enabling their implementation.

**WOMEN AND WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS SHOULD ALSO PARTICIPATE IN ALL NEGOTIATIONS AND DECISION-MAKING REGARDING THE FUTURE OF GAZA**



In the implementation of the current Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan, it is important to make use of the lessons learned from the previous action plans<sup>216</sup>. A key challenge has been the insufficient resourcing of 1325 work in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, other ministries and civil society. Sufficient budget and human resources should be allocated for the implementation of the new action plan, and these should also be reflected in the monitoring of the 1325 work. The Finnish Women, Peace and Security network, consisting of NGOs and researchers, does important work in monitoring the 1325 work and channelling Finnish expertise, but it is under-resourced. Decisions to end general grants to peace organisations and government aid intended for NGOs' foreign and security policy activities, as well as the more extensive cuts in development cooperation funding, jeopardise the NGOs' ability to operate.

The reporting on 1325 work must consistently take into account how the gender perspective has been included and implemented in arms control, disarmament and the prevention of the proliferation of weapons at both national and international level. The reporting of actions at the national level has not been included in previous assessments of action plans. The discontinuation of the funding of peace organisations, which took place in 2024, undermines NGOs' ability to monitor Finland's arms exports.

In its recent Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy<sup>217</sup>, Finland commits to drawing up a new Youth, Peace and Security National Action Plan when the current action plan ends in 2024. In drawing up the new action plan, the diversity and intersectionality of young people, such as the inclusion of young people with disabilities and immigrant young people, must be taken into account even better. The discontinued funding of the Youth, Peace and Security Network must be restored in order to ensure the participation of young people in the preparation and implementation of the action plan.

Finland must also commit to its Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan in Gaza, as the real significance of the Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan is judged by how Finland implements it<sup>218</sup>. Finland's Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan emphasises that Finland must pay special attention to the need for protection of vulnerable people, including people with disabilities. The implementation of the Action Plan in Gaza would require, for example, actions to achieve a permanent ceasefire and deliver sufficient humanitarian aid. Women-specific needs must be taken into account in Finland's humanitarian aid to Gaza, including the provision of sexual and reproductive health services and psychosocial support. Women and women's organisations must also participate in all negotiations and decision-making concerning the future of Gaza.

## **THE TIGHTENING OF IMMIGRATION POLICY THREATENS WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' RIGHTS**

The planned legislative amendments would make applying for asylum, work-based immigration and family reunification more difficult. For example, a person would have to leave Finland if their employment ends and they have not entered into a new employment relationship within three months. The refugee quota will be reduced from 1,050 to 500. The criteria for getting a permanent residence permit and the requirements for citizenship will be tightened: in the future, people will be required to have lived in the country for eight years instead of five. The Government also wants to deny people who have received a negative asylum decision the chance to get a work-based residence permit. The reception allowance will be reduced significantly. International protection will be made temporary and residence permits will be shortened so that people receiving subsidiary protection will have to go through up to five permit processes before they can get a permanent residence permit. The opportunity for unaccompanied children to reunite their families will be restricted. In the absence of safe routes, women in particular will suffer if family reunification is made more difficult.

The Border Security Act passed by Parliament in July 2024 will also significantly weaken the position of asylum seekers. According to human rights organisations<sup>219</sup>, the Border Security Act, which aims to prevent the instrumentalisation of migration, means in practice an abandonment of international obligations to guarantee everyone the opportunity to apply for asylum. These changes will impede the identification of vulnerable people in the asylum process and, in the worst case, make it practically impossible. The changes have significant impacts on the rights of vulnerable people and the opportunities of immigrant women to participate in public life and the world of work.

## **GENDER MUST BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT IN ASYLUM POLICY AND PRACTICES**

In the asylum application process, it should be taken into account that women and girls have special protection needs and the reasons for seeking asylum may be gender-based: gender-based violence, female genital mutilation or other persecution related to gender, sexual orientation or gender identity. However, the need for gender-based protection may go unnoticed in the asylum process if the applicant is unable or unwilling to

express it in the interview. Lawyers and organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees have expressed concerns about the interview practices, which are considered to make it difficult to bring up persecution and violence<sup>220</sup>.

The vulnerability factors related to sexual and gender minorities in conflict countries and in the asylum application process must also be better identified in order to ensure that the asylum application process is appropriate and non-discriminatory and that the professionals and authorities have the relevant competence. Support for deaf refugees and asylum seekers who use sign language and their access to the sign language community and sign language teaching and services must be given greater attention.

The ability of professionals and authorities to identify violence against women should be developed, which would improve the protection of asylum seekers and the availability of services. Training on gender-based violence has been provided, but there is still a great need for it. Female genital mutilation is already fairly well recognised as a ground for asylum in Migri, but the seriousness of other honour-related violence is not always understood. A particular problem is the difficulty of obtaining an independent residence permit for a person who has experienced violence and whose residence permit is based on family ties. If the residence permit of a victim of violence is linked to their spouse's residence permit on the basis of marriage, the victim may not be granted an independent residence permit even if there has been violence in the relationship<sup>221</sup>.

**IN THE ASYLUM APPLICATION PROCESS, IT SHOULD BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT THAT WOMEN AND GIRLS HAVE SPECIAL PROTECTION NEEDS AND THE REASONS FOR SEEKING ASYLUM MAY BE GENDER-BASED**



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## THE ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Enhance the effect of Agenda 2030 on financial steering and regulation (**Prime Minister's Office**)
- 2 Mainstream the gender perspective in national climate and energy policy (**Ministry of the Environment, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment**)
- 3 Produce research data on climate change and climate and energy policy in Finland that takes the gender perspective into account for use as a basis for decision-making (**Ministry of the Environment, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry**)
- 4 Include the promotion of sustainable development and adapting to and combatting climate change in the form of actions in the Government Action Plan for Gender Equality and the Government Report on Gender Equality Policy (**Ministry of the Environment, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health**)
- 5 Finland must work actively to integrate the gender perspective into EU climate policy and UN activities (**Prime Minister's Office, Ministry for Foreign Affairs**)
- 6 Finland must support the participation of women and the mainstreaming of gender equality in international climate and nature agreement negotiations (**Ministry of the Environment, Ministry for Foreign Affairs**)
- 7 Direct climate funding to projects that promote gender equality (**Ministry of the Environment, Ministry for Foreign Affairs**)
- 8 Ensure that the rights of women and girls and the promotion of gender equality will remain as the key focuses of Finland's development cooperation. Extend development cooperation to organisations promoting the rights of LGBTQI+ people internationally. Finland must commit to raising the level of development cooperation appropriations to the level required by the UN (0.7% of gross national income) (**Ministry for Foreign Affairs**)

- 9 Ensure that gender equality is either a significant partial or main objective in 85% of all new development programmes and increase the number of projects promoting gender equality as their primary objective **(Ministry for Foreign Affairs)**
- 10 Take into account the gender equality requirement of climate funding and biodiversity. Regularly assess climate policy from a gender equality perspective **(Ministry of the Environment, Ministry for Foreign Affairs)**

## THE IMPACTS OF EXTREME WEATHER ARE GENDERED

The climate is changing in an unequal world, and therefore the impacts of climate change are gendered. The impacts of climate change are most evident in the everyday lives of the most vulnerable people, especially in the living conditions and future opportunities of women and girls in the poorest countries. Women are significantly more likely to die in natural disasters than men. This difference is most evident in societies where the status of women is low and where natural disasters are particularly severe. The natural disasters and displacement caused by climate change expose women and girls to sexual harassment and violence. Impaired food security and livelihoods make life more difficult for women and girls. They are often responsible for cooking and fetching water. In addition, women and girls are the first to lose access to food and other resources, such as education and health care<sup>222</sup>.

In addition to gender, factors such as age, socioeconomic status, education, health and functional capacity affect the impact of the climate crisis on individuals and groups. In Europe, women suffer from the health effects of heatwaves, among other things. The effects are particularly severe in elderly women, women with disabilities and long-term illnesses, Romani women, racialised women and women with a foreign background<sup>223</sup>. Energy poverty also affects women in particular, especially older women living alone and single mothers<sup>224</sup>. The climate crisis also has significant impacts on mental health, which affect young people particularly severely, especially girls and young women.

## THE GENDER PERSPECTIVE MUST BE INTEGRATED INTO CLIMATE, ENVIRONMENTAL AND ENERGY POLICY

Finland must comprehensively integrate the gender perspective into its climate policy. This means assessing the gender impacts of climate and energy policy and making use of the assessment in the planning and

implementation of climate change mitigation and adaptation measures. A good example of this is the comprehensive gender impact assessment of the climate and energy strategy, which was used in the Medium-Term Climate Change Policy Plan, among other things. On the other hand, the assessment of the implementation of Agenda 2030 has been gender neutral and the Government Action Plan for Gender Equality does not address climate change at the level of actions. Gender-relevant research data is needed to support decision-making in order to make informed decisions and plans. For example, consumption habits, dietary choices and choices of means of transport differ according to gender. For example, women make up the majority of vegetarians. According to an analysis by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Finnish women were more likely to use public transport (32%) and walking (60%) as one of their three main forms of mobility in 2020 compared to men (28% and 55%). On the other hand, more men (44%) than women (42%) reported regularly choosing low-emission forms of mobility, such as cycling, public transport or carpooling<sup>225</sup>.

According to EIGE, male-dominated industries are likely to benefit the most from Europe's green transition in the form of new jobs<sup>226</sup>. The green transition requires new skills and qualifications, especially in the fields of technology and natural sciences, which are highly male-dominated in Finland. Finland has the second deepest segregation in higher education in Europe, which makes it difficult for women to benefit from the jobs and other financial and professional opportunities offered by the green transition. This segregation is also reflected in climate, energy and transport policymaking, where the proportion of women is low<sup>227</sup>.

According to a report<sup>228</sup> by Nordic Christian aid organisations, only half of the Nordic climate funding in the form of development cooperation is focused on promoting gender equality. Gender equality targets are more often included in the funding of adaptation measures than in the funding of mitigation measures. NGOs include gender equality targets in their projects the most often, whereas private sector actors rarely do so. In Sweden, climate funding that promotes gender equality increased significantly when the country's government committed to feminist foreign policy in 2014, reaching the highest level in the Nordic countries (80%) in 2019.

Climate change impacts the livelihoods and way of life of indigenous peoples. The climate in the Arctic is changing faster than elsewhere, and Sámi people have already had to adapt to the changed weather and species distribution. In general, climate change has had a negative impact on the mental health and well-being of Sámi people and increased the risk of food insecurity and various illnesses<sup>229</sup>.

## **CUTS IN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION UNDERMINE GENDER EQUALITY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND CLIMATE JUSTICE**

Finland is committed to the EU's target that 85% of new development cooperation projects must include gender equality targets by 2025. Gender equality was a primary or secondary objective in 57% of development programmes in 2022. Finland must pay attention to the funding of women's organisations, feminist organisations and sexual and gender minority organisations in Finland, internationally and at the grassroots level<sup>230</sup>.

According to the OECD, only 0.5% of funds allocated for promoting gender equality go to women's organisations. Finland must therefore assess how much of its development cooperation funds are allocated to women's organisations in the Global South and systematically develop the principles of feminist development cooperation that improve the operating conditions of civil society and ensure the predictability and flexibility of funding. A good example is the Equality Fund, launched by Canada in 2019, which aims to support women's organisations and feminist actors worldwide. The Canadian fund's initial investment of CAD 300 million was the largest government investment ever made in women's organisations<sup>231</sup>.

When monitoring funding that promotes gender equality, the overall situation of Finnish development cooperation funding must also be taken into account. In 2019–2023, the Government increased development cooperation appropriations following the cuts made by the previous government. By 2021, the amount of development cooperation appropriations in euros had risen back to the level of 2014, to about EUR 1,200 million<sup>232</sup>. However, the share of development cooperation appropriations of the gross national income did not exceed 0.5%, falling far short of the commitment to increase the share of development cooperation appropriations to the 0.7% share recommended by the UN. The significant cuts in development cooperation appropriations during the current government term will reduce Finland's share to the middle tier of OECD countries (approximately 0.35%). At the same time, inequality is increasing globally. The impact of the cuts on girls' and women's rights and sustainable development should be assessed systematically and openly.

Finland must invest in the promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights, as there is little funding of this kind worldwide. This would also be in line with Finland's foreign policy values. Finland must also pay greater attention to the rights of sexual and gender minorities in various areas of foreign policy. Girls must also be taken into account as a special group in human rights and development policy. Globally, girls face triple discrimination due to their age, gender and poverty. Girls must not be seen as merely victims and sufferers of armed conflicts, as they also have the skills and potential to take part in solving crises and influencing developments.

The recent Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy<sup>233</sup> takes into account sexual and reproductive health and rights and, for the first time, the promotion of the rights of sexual and gender minorities as part of Finland's foreign policy. The topics are discussed more extensively than in the Government Programme, for example. However, the Government's actions, in particular the EUR 1.2 billion spending cuts in development cooperation, undermine its ability to achieve the relatively ambitious objectives of the Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy.

## **POLARISING ATTITUDES TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

The polarisation of attitudes and values affects the public debate on environmental, climate change and sustainable development policy. The rise of the anti-gender movement, conservatism and populism is a threat to the rights of women, girls and LGBTQI+ people, sexual and reproductive rights and environmental and climate policy in Finland, in the EU and globally.

Polarisation is reflected in attitudes towards climate change and development cooperation. According to an analysis by EIGE<sup>234</sup>, 77% of Finnish women and 63% of Finnish men feel personal responsibility for mitigating climate change (in 2018). These figures are higher than the EU average (62% of women and 61% of men). In fact, Finland has the highest percentage of women in all EU Member States who feel personal responsibility for combatting climate change, and the difference in attitudes between women and men is also significantly bigger than the EU average.

**THE RISE OF THE ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENT, CONSERVATISM AND POPULISM IS A THREAT TO THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN, GIRLS AND LGBTQI+ PEOPLE, SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE POLICY IN FINLAND, THE EU AND GLOBALLY.**

According to a study commissioned by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs<sup>235</sup>, Finns' opinions related to development cooperation are also highly gendered. While as many as 80% of women consider development cooperation to be very important or somewhat important, only 46% of men think so. Men's attitudes towards development cooperation have hardened: 39% of men report that their attitude towards development cooperation has become more negative recently (compared to 26% of women), and Finns' attitudes towards development cooperation have become polarised in general.

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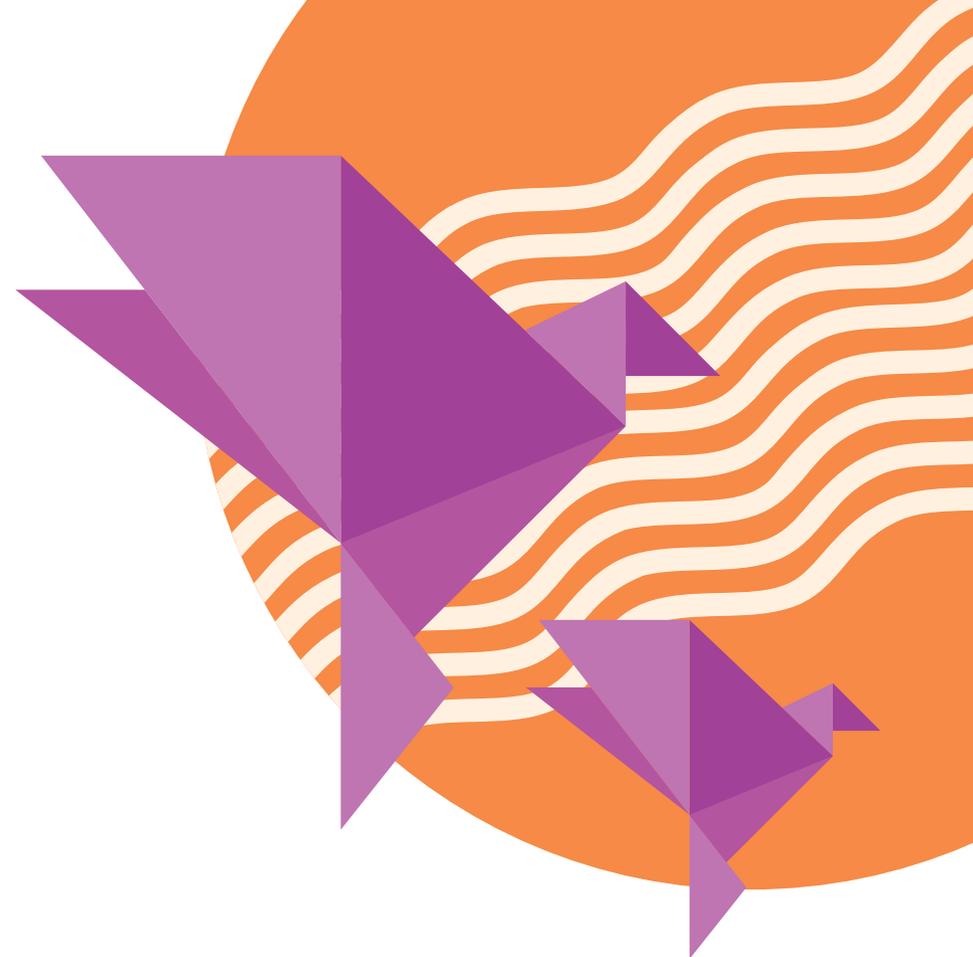
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<sup>235</sup> Tommi Saarnio and Tuomo Turja, "Suomalaisten mielipiteet kehitysyhteistyöstä 2023", Tutkimusraportti - Ulkoministeriö (Taloustutkimus Oy, 2023).



**THE BEIJING+25 NGO REPORT PROVIDED BY THE  
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN OF FINLAND  
WAS DRAWN UP IN COLLABORATION WITH THE  
FOLLOWING PARTIES:**



AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FINNISH SECTION

CMI - MARTTI AHTISAARI PEACE FOUNDATION

DAISY LADIES RY

DEMARINAISSET RY

THE DEACONESS FOUNDATION

THE FEDERATION OF MOTHER AND  
CHILD HOMES AND SHELTERS

EUROOPPANAISET RY

FINLANDS SVENSKA IDROTT

FINLANDS SVENSKA MARTHAFÖRBUND RF

CYNEKOLOGINEN POTILASJÄRJESTÖ KORENTO RY

HELSINKI PRIDE COMMUNITY

THE FINNISH LEAGUE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

THE FINNISH ASSOCIATION FOR  
BREASTFEEDING SUPPORT

THE KALEVALA WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

KOKOOMUKSEN NAISTEN LIITTO RY

KUUROJEN LIITTO RY

THE CENTRAL UNION FOR CHILD WELFARE

LOISTO SETTLEMENTTI RY

LYÖMÄTÖN LINJA ESPOOSSA RY

THE MARTHA ASSOCIATION

MIELI MENTAL HEALTH FINLAND

MIELENTERVEYSPUOLI

MONIKA - MULTICULTURAL WOMEN'S  
ASSOCIATION, FINLAND

DIVERSE FAMILIES NETWORK

MOTHERS IN BUSINESS MIB RY

WOMEN'S LINE

NAISTENKARTANO RY

THE FINNISH WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION UNIONI

THE COALITION OF FINNISH WOMEN'S  
ASSOCIATIONS NYTKIS

WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN FINLAND

THE SOCIETY OF FINNISH FEMALE  
PROFESSIONAL FORESTERS

NICEHEARTS RY

THE FINNISH OLYMPIC COMMITTEE

PLAN INTERNATIONAL FINLAND

SETA - LGBTI RIGHTS IN FINLAND

THE FINNISH FEDERATION OF GRADUATE WOMEN

THE FEDERATION OF FINNISH MIDWIVES

THE FINNISH EVANGELICAL  
LUTHERAN MISSION

SUOMALAINEN NAISSLIITTO RY

SUOMEN NAISYHDISTYS RY

SUOMEN NAISLÄÄKÄRIYHDISTYS - FINLANDS  
KVINNLIKA LÄKARES FÖRENING RY

THE YWCA OF FINLAND

THE FINNISH RED CROSS

SUOMEN SOMALINAISTEN KEHITYS RY

THE FINNISH WHITE RIBBON UNION

THE FINNISH GYMNASTICS FEDERATION

WORLD VISION FINLAND

THE UN ASSOCIATION OF FINLAND

THE WOMEN'S ORGANISATION OF THE  
SWEDISH PEOPLE'S PARTY IN FINLAND

TRANSFEMINIINIT RY

TUNNE RINTASI RY

UN WOMEN FINLAND

THE FINNISH ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN WITH  
DISABILITIES - ROSETTE

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION  
TEACHERS' UNION OF FINLAND

VASEMMISTONAISET

THE FAMILY FEDERATION OF FINLAND

THE GREEN WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

WIFT FINLAND RY - WOMEN IN FILM AND  
TELEVISION FINLAND

ZONTA INTERNATIONAL