



Finland

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2000](#)

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Finland is a constitutional republic with an elected head of state (President), a Parliament, a head of government (Prime Minister), and an independent judiciary.

The security apparatus is controlled effectively by elected officials and supervised by the courts.

The economy is mixed but primarily market based. It provides citizens with a high standard of living.

The Government generally respected the human rights of its citizens, and the law and judiciary provide effective means of dealing with individual instances of abuse. The Government is taking serious steps to address the problem of violence against women. There were reports of trafficking in persons.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killing

There were no reports of political or other extrajudicial killings.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The Constitution prohibits such practices, and there were no reports that officials employed them.

Prison conditions meet minimum international standards, and the Government permits visits by human rights monitors.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

The Constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile, and the Government observes this prohibition.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary, and the Government respects this provision in practice.

The judiciary consists of the Supreme Court, the Supreme Administrative Court, and the lower courts. The President appoints Supreme Court justices, who in turn appoint the lower court judges.

The law provides for the right to fair public trial, and the judiciary vigorously enforces this right. Local courts may conduct a closed trial in juvenile, matrimonial, and guardianship cases, or when publicity would offend morality or endanger the security of the state. In national security cases, the judge may withhold from the public any or all information pertaining to charges, verdicts, and sentences. The law provides for sanctions against violators of such restrictions.

There were no reports of political prisoners.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The Constitution prohibits such practices, government authorities generally respect these prohibitions, and violations are subject to effective legal sanction.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The Constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and the Government respects these rights in practice. An independent press, an effective judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combine to ensure freedom of speech and of the press, including academic freedom.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Constitution provides for these rights, and the Government respects them in practice.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government respects this right in practice. Nontraditional religious groups freely profess and propagate their beliefs. Such groups are eligible for some tax relief (e.g., they may receive tax-free donations), provided they are registered with the Government as religious communities. The Government's procedures for recognizing religious communities remained under review at year's end. About 87 percent of the population belongs to two state churches, the Lutheran and the Orthodox. All citizens belonging to one of these state churches pay, as part of their income tax, a church tax. These church taxes are used to defray the costs of operating the state churches. Those who do not want to pay the tax must notify the tax office.

Such groups as Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints have been active in the country for decades. In 1998 the Ministry of Education turned down the application of the Finnish Association of Scientologists to be registered as a religious community. This was the first time that an applicant had been denied church status. The Scientologists' application was pending for nearly 3 years while the Government awaited additional information that it had requested from the association. The association acknowledged that it had not responded to the Government's request. The Education Ministry's decision can be appealed to the Supreme Administrative Court. The Scientologists have not yet done so, but they have indicated that they may begin the process anew and reapply for recognition as a church.

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The Constitution provides for these rights, and the Government respects them in practice.

The Government cooperates with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees. Approved refugees and asylum seekers are processed directly for residence. The issue of the provision of first asylum has never arisen. There were no reports of the forced expulsion of persons with a valid claim to refugee status.

A total of 3,106 persons applied for asylum in 1999, up from 1,272 in 1998. As many as 1,516 of them were Slovakian Roma. By August 20, 2000, 2,472 persons had already submitted their applications for asylum. Of these applications, 1,192 were submitted by Polish Roma. In 1999 the Directorate of Immigration processed 2,725 applications, awarding asylum to 29 persons and residence permits to 467. Government officials attribute the sharp increase in the number of asylum seekers from 1998 to the first half of 2000 to two factors: the 1999 fighting in Kosovo and the increase in 1999-2000 asylum applications from Slovakian and Polish Roma. The Government imposed a visa regime on Slovakian citizens in July 1999. Although the restriction

was lifted in November of that year, it was reimposed in January 2000 for 6 additional months after a large number of Slovakian Roma again entered the country and requested asylum.

On July 10, a new asylum law took effect, under which immigration authorities must process an application within 7 days of the initial asylum examination. Asylum seekers who are rejected have 8 days in which to appeal the decision, after which time they are deported. This law is expected to decrease the number of asylum seekers substantially. Under the previous system, the processing of applications could take over a year. If the applicant received a negative decision, the processing of the appeal could take several years. Some members of the public and even politicians within the ruling coalition opposed the new law, citing the short period during which asylum seekers can appeal the rejection of their application. However, the Government defended the law by stating that it only can provide public resources and services to asylum seekers who have legitimate concerns about their safety and welfare in their home countries. Particularly in regard to Slovakian and Polish Roma, officials noted that the two source countries were aspirants for European Union (EU) membership and pointed out the contradiction of supporting Slovakia and Poland for EU membership while also offering asylum to their citizens.

In 1999 a law went into effect to promote the integration of immigrants into society. This law is unrelated to the new statute governing asylum procedures; it is aimed instead at assisting those who have been granted asylum.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The Constitution provides citizens with the right to change their government peacefully, and citizens exercise this right in practice through periodic, free, and fair elections held on the basis of universal suffrage.

Women are increasingly well represented at all levels of government. There are 75 women in the 200-member Parliament, and 7 in the 18-member Cabinet. The President, who is elected directly, and the Speaker of Parliament are women. A 1995 law requires a minimum of 40 percent membership from each sex on all state committees, commissions, and appointed municipal bodies.

Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

A number of human rights groups operate without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials are very cooperative and responsive to their views.

Section 5 Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion, Disability, Language, or Social Status

The Constitution prohibits discrimination based on sex, age, origin, language, religion, conviction, opinion, or disability, and the Government effectively enforces these provisions.

Women

Violence against women is a problem, and the Government is taking steps to combat it. Police statistics for 1999 recorded 2,825 cases of domestic violence, 117 more than the previous year. Of the victims, 2,290 were women, and 535 were men. A total of 514 cases of rape were reported to the police in 1999, compared with 463 in 1998. Government experts say that as many as half, if not more, of all rape cases may go unreported. The law specifically criminalizes rape, spousal rape, and domestic abuse. The law provides for stringent penalties for violence against women; the police and the courts vigorously enforce this provision.

The number of calls to the police concerned with domestic violence is not compiled centrally but is estimated at 10,000 to 12,000 annually. Shelter officials state that the figure represents less than half of the number of actual incidents. Most of the persons seeking shelter are women between 25 and 35 years of age, either married or in a common-law relationship. Nearly one-third are immigrants.

The Union of Shelter Homes as well as the municipalities maintain homes all over the country for female, male, adult, and child victims of violence. The total number of shelters is around 20. The criteria for what counts as a shelter has changed. In the past battered persons in need of shelter could be given keys to apartments where they could spend the necessary length of time prior to returning home. These apartments were included in the 1999 statistics. Now, the minimum requirement for a shelter is 24-hour staff.

A study published in 1998 indicated that the typical victim of family violence is a young woman between 18 and

24 years of age who is married or is living in a common law relationship. The study concluded that every fifth married woman or woman involved in a common law relationship has suffered from violent behavior at the hands of her partner. The study also concludes that as many as 40 percent of all women over the age of 15 have experienced some form of family violence. (The study considers psychological and verbal abuse as "violence.")

In 1997 the Government began a special program to promote women's equality during the period from 1997 to 1999. This program consisted of 30 projects, 1 of which focused on violence against women and domestic violence. The project against violence offered nationwide support for women in need and for men to combat their own tendencies to resort to violence. This project has been regarded as the most significant component of the women's equality program in that it has helped to break the taboo about the subject. The program may be renewed once the Government evaluates the results. The Government also promised to maintain a program against prostitution and violence until 2002.

The government-established Council for Equality coordinates and sponsors legislation to meet the needs of women as workers, mothers, widows, or retirees.

The Constitution calls for the promotion of equality of the sexes in social activities and working life, the latter particularly in the determination of remuneration. In 1985 the Parliament passed a more detailed comprehensive equal rights law that mandates equal treatment for women in the workplace, including equal pay for "comparable" jobs. In practice comparable worth has not been implemented because of the difficulty of establishing criteria, but the Government, employers, unions, and others continued to work on implementation plans. Women's average earnings are 82 percent of those of men, and women still tend to be segregated in lower paying occupations. While women individually have attained leadership positions in the private and public sectors, there are disproportionately fewer women in top management jobs. Industry and finance, the labor movement, and some government ministries remain male dominated. Some 60 percent of physicians are women. Women serve in the armed forces. The Government's equality ombudsman monitors compliance with regulations against sexual discrimination. Of the 63 complaints processed by the Ombudsman between January 1 and June 30, 10 cases were judged to be violations of the law. In such cases, the law provides for correction of the situation as well as compensation for the complainant.

There were reports of trafficking in women (see Section 6.f.).

Children

The Government demonstrates its strong commitment to children's rights and welfare through its well-funded systems of public education and medical care. There is no pattern of societal abuse of children, and the national consensus supporting children's rights is enshrined in law.

There were reports of trafficking in children (see Section 6.f.).

People with Disabilities

Although since the 1970's the law has required that new public buildings be accessible to people with physical disabilities, many older buildings remain inaccessible. No such law applies to public transportation, but each municipality subsidizes measures to improve accessibility to vehicles. Local governments maintain a free transport service that provides a minimum of 18 free trips per month for a disabled person. The deaf and the mute are provided interpretation services ranging from 120 to 240 hours annually. The Government provides subsidized public housing to the severely disabled.

Indigenous People

Sami (Lapps), who constitute less than 0.1 percent of the population, benefit from legal provisions that provide for the protection of minority rights and customs. Sami language and culture are supported in the Constitution and financially by the Government. Sami receive subsidies to enable them to continue their traditional lifestyle, which revolves around reindeer herding. Sami have political and civil rights and are able to participate in decisions affecting their economic and cultural interests.

In 1998 the President issued instructions on implementing an EU directive on the use of minority and regional languages. The directive's purpose is to ensure that the use of minority languages is permitted in school, the media, dealings with administrative and judicial authorities, economic and commercial life, and cultural activities. The Sami language belongs to the category of a minority language used regionally.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

The number of immigrants rose from 18,000 in 1987 to 90,000 in 2000. Concurrent with this increase, concern has arisen about increasing expressions of racist and xenophobic behavior. Antiforeigner or racist violence has been reported. Leading government figures, including the President, have condemned such violence. The Government is attempting to address this problem in part through an in-depth study of attitudes toward different ethnic groups. The government study examines discrimination in working life, looks into popular attitudes toward foreigners, and charts the attitudes of those authorities involved in immigration affairs-- police, teachers, social workers, border guards, and employment office personnel. The popular attitudes survey found that half of those interviewed acknowledged some feelings of xenophobia or prejudice. The study continued at year's end.

While the Government implemented new legislation during the year making it somewhat more difficult to gain political asylum (see Section 2.d.), other government-sponsored initiatives were aimed at improving the situation of noncitizens. In 1999 a law promoting the enhanced integration of immigrants into society went into effect. In addition the Government in 1997 issued policy guidelines for promoting tolerance and combating racism.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The Constitution provides for the rights of trade unions to organize, to assemble peacefully, and to strike, and the Government respects these provisions. About 87 percent of the work force is organized. All unions are independent of the Government and political parties. The law grants public sector employees the right to strike, with some exceptions for the provision of essential services. In the first half of the year, there were 72 strikes (most of them minor and brief), of which 58 were wildcat strikes.

Trade unions freely affiliate with international bodies.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law provides for the right to organize and bargain collectively. Collective bargaining agreements usually are based on income policy agreements between employee and employer central organizations and the Government. The law protects workers against antiunion discrimination. Complaint resolution is governed by collective bargaining agreements as well as labor law, both of which are enforced adequately.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The Constitution prohibits forced or compulsory labor, and this prohibition generally is observed in practice; however, there were reports of trafficking in persons (see Section 6.f.). The law prohibits forced and bonded labor by children and adults, and such practices do not exist. The Government enforces this prohibition effectively.

d. Status of Child Labor Practices and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits forced and bonded labor by children (see Section 6.c.). Youths under 16 years of age cannot work more than 6 hours a day or at night, and education is compulsory for children from 7 to 16 years of age. The Labor Ministry enforces child labor regulations. There are virtually no complaints of the exploitation of children in the work force. The Government ratified ILO Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labor in January.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

There is no legislated minimum wage, but the law requires all employers--including nonunionized ones--to meet the minimum wages agreed to in collective bargaining agreements in the respective industrial sector. These minimum wages generally afford a decent standard of living for workers and their families.

The legal workweek consists of 5 days not exceeding 40 hours. Employees working shifts or during the

weekend are entitled to a 24-hour rest period during the week. The law is enforced effectively as a minimum, and many workers enjoy even stronger benefits through effectively enforced collective bargaining agreements.

The Government sets occupational health and safety standards, and the Labor Ministry effectively enforces them. Workers can refuse dangerous work situations without risk of penalty.

f. Trafficking in Persons

The law does not explicitly prohibit trafficking in persons, although existing statutes address a range of trafficking-related crimes, and there were reports that trafficking occurred. Finland is a secondary destination-transit country for such trafficking. The Government believes that most such trafficking involves women and girls for prostitution. The Government and nongovernmental organizations are making a considerable effort to counter trafficking, e.g., through the Government's leading role in the EU's antitrafficking "STOP" project.

[End.]