



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Iceland

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2006](#)

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Iceland, with a population of 300,000, is a constitutional, parliamentary republic. The president is the head of state; a prime minister, usually the head of the majority party, is head of government. There is a unicameral parliament (Althingi). In 2004 Olafur Ragnar Grimsson was reelected president in free and fair elections. On June 7, Geir Haarde (Independence Party) replaced Halldor Asgrimsson (Progressive Party) as prime minister when the latter retired from politics. Civilian authorities generally maintained effective control of the security forces.

The government generally respected the human rights of its citizens, and the law and judiciary provided effective means of addressing individual instances of abuse. The following human rights problems were reported: violence against women, societal discrimination against minorities and foreigners, and isolated reports of women trafficked to, through, and possibly from the country.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

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

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

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions generally met international standards, and the government permitted visits by independent human rights observers.

In a December 2005 report, the Council of Europe (COE) commissioner for human rights expressed concern that prisoners did not have access to specialized mental health care services. The commissioner urged the authorities to arrange for treatment--outside the prison system if necessary--to meet individual care requirements. Prisoners needing psychological and psychiatric services continued to experience delays, but prison authorities hired a second part-time psychiatrist at the prison to ensure that psychiatric personnel were present at least 50 percent of the time by year's end, up from 25 percent in the summer. Emergency needs for either service received immediate attention.

During the late summer, an increase in arrests and resulting pretrial detention caused some overcrowding at the detention facility in Reykjavik. At the problem's peak, the facility held between five and 10 more detainees than its designed capacity. Authorities were forced to move some detainees temporarily to the main prison and release others sooner than originally planned. Opposition parties criticized the minister of justice for not doing enough to construct new prison housing to meet increased demand for pretrial detention space. In December the Althingi enacted the government's 2007 budget, which included funds for the expansion, modernization, and upgrade of two smaller prisons in Kviabryggja and Akureyri, but not for the main prison at Litla-Hraun. Throughout the entire prison and detention system, during the year an average of 117.7 prisoners occupied facilities designed for 137 inmates.

The government maintained a separate minimum-security prison for female inmates; however, because so few women were incarcerated (five or six in July) some men were also held there. Men housed in facilities with women were closely monitored and only interacted with women in the common areas--they did not share cellblocks. In the rare instances when juvenile offenders were incarcerated, they were held with adults, since there was no separate facility for juveniles. Pretrial detainees were held with convicted prisoners.

The 110 persons placed in custody during the year spent an average of 11.2 days each in solitary confinement. In nine cases prisoners spent more than a month in isolation. The average prisoner awaiting trial or being tried spent 1.7 days in isolation. Most of the minors who were held in custody during the year (fewer than 20 in all) spent some time in isolation. The government permitted visits by independent

human rights observers during the year. Prisoners could, and did, request visits from volunteers from the Icelandic Red Cross, or so-called "prisoners' friends." The volunteers talked with the prisoners and provided them with second-hand clothes upon request. There were no prison visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) during the year.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention, and the government generally observed these prohibitions.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The minister of justice heads the police force. The national commissioner of police administers and runs those police operations requiring centralized coordination among various offices. Various district chiefs of police have responsibility for law enforcement in their areas. The police were effective, and corruption was not a problem. Complaints regarding police abuses could be directed to a state prosecutor, who in turn would seek investigative assistance from the national commissioner or, if the national commissioner were the subject of the investigation, the Reykjavik police department.

Arrest and Detention

Police may make arrests under a number of circumstances: when they believe a prosecutable offense has been committed, where necessary to prevent further offenses or destruction of evidence, to protect the suspect's safety, or when a person refuses to obey police orders to move. Arrest warrants were usually not required; the criminal code explicitly requires warrants only for arrests when individuals fail to present themselves in court to attend a hearing or a trial, or to prison to serve a sentence.

Persons placed under arrest are entitled to legal counsel, which is provided by the government if they are indigent. Authorities must inform persons under arrest of their rights and must bring them before a judge within 24 hours. The judge determines whether a suspect must remain in custody during the investigation; the judge may grant conditional release, subject to assurances that the accused will appear for trial.

In his December 2005 report, the COE's commissioner for human rights recommended that only judges, not police officers or prosecutors, be permitted to place detainees, particularly minors, in solitary confinement. The Ministry of Justice disagreed with this recommendation and no action was taken.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected this provision in practice.

There are two levels of courts: district courts, of which there are 8, and the Supreme Court. The minister of justice appoints all judges, who serve for life.

Trial Procedures

The constitution provides for the right to a fair trial, and with limited exceptions an independent judiciary enforced this right.

Courts do not use juries, but multi-judge panels are common, particularly in the Supreme Court. The courts presume defendants' innocence and generally try them without delay. Defendants receive access to legal counsel of their own choosing. For defendants unable to pay attorneys' fees, the government covers the cost; however, defendants who are found guilty must reimburse the government. Defendants have the right to be present at their trial, to confront witnesses, and to participate in the proceedings. They and their attorneys have access to government-held evidence relevant to their cases. At the discretion of the courts, prosecutors may introduce evidence that police obtained illegally. With limited exceptions trials were public and conducted fairly. Defendants have the right to appeal, and the Supreme Court handles appeals expeditiously.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

There is a single court system that handles both criminal and civil matters. The two levels of the judiciary--the district courts and the Supreme Court--are widely considered to be independent and impartial in civil matters. There were no significant reports of problems enforcing domestic court orders. Courts often awarded civil payment of damages in criminal cases. In both criminal and civil cases, if a guilty party fails to pay awarded damages, the government will intervene to pay the damages and then initiate collection action against the delinquent party.

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

The constitution prohibits such actions, and the government generally respected this prohibition in practice.

In order to obtain a permit to stay in the country based on marriage to a citizen or the holder of a resident permit, a partner or spouse must be at least 24 years of age. In 2005 the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the Council of Europe commissioner for human rights both expressed concern about this requirement; however, there was no official action during the year in response to these concerns.

Immigration law allows authorities to conduct house searches without a prior court order when there is a significant risk that any delay would jeopardize an investigation of immigration fraud; they may also request DNA tests without court supervision in cases where they suspect immigration fraud. In practice neither home searches without warrants nor DNA tests took place during the year.

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 generally respected these rights in practice. An independent press, an effective judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combined to ensure freedom of speech and of the press.

The law establishes fines and imprisonment of up to three months for those who publicly deride or belittle the religious doctrines of a lawful religious association active in the country. Additionally, the law establishes fines and imprisonment of up to two years to anyone who publicly ridicules, slanders, insults, threatens, or in any other manner publicly assaults, a person or a group of people on the basis of their nationality, skin color, race, religion, or sexual orientation. There were no reports that the law was invoked during the year.

Internet Freedom

There were no government restrictions on access to the Internet or reports that the government monitored e-mail or Internet chatrooms. Individuals and groups could engage in the peaceful expression of views via the Internet, including by electronic mail.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution provides for freedom of assembly and association, and the government generally respected these rights in practice.

c. Freedom of Religion

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the government generally respected this right in practice; however, the state financially supported and promoted the official religion, Lutheranism. This adversely affected other religions in that they did not receive equal time and deference in school curricula or comparable subsidies for their faith-based activities.

The law specifies conditions and procedures that religious organizations must follow to be registered by the government. Such recognition was necessary for religious organizations other than the state church if they wished to receive a per capita share of church tax funds from the government. Of three groups that applied to register as religious organizations during the year, two, the Free Church of Iceland and the Baptist Church of Sudurnes, had their applications denied on grounds of not being sufficiently well established. The government did not place any restrictions or requirements on unregistered religious organizations, which had the same rights as other groups in society.

All citizens 16 years of age and older must pay an annual church tax of approximately \$121 (8,472 krona). For persons who were not registered as belonging to a religious organization, or who belonged to one that was not registered and officially recognized, the tax payment went to the University of Iceland, a secular institution. Atheists and humanists objected to having their fee go to the university, asserting that this was inconsistent with the right of freedom of association.

In January the Icelandic Pagan Association (Asatuarfelagith) sued the Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs and the Ministry of Finance to receive funding proportional to its membership from monies currently made available only to the national church. These monies supplement the income that the national church receives from church taxes, exclusively favoring state Lutheranism, which the plaintiff alleged was a violation of the antidiscrimination provisions of the European Convention of Human Rights. In November the Reykjavik District Court ruled that the state does not have to give the association comparable funding to what the national church is receiving. The court based its reasoning on the fact that the national church is obligated by law to provide a number of services and carry out specific functions, so it is not unjust that it gets more funding from the state than other religious organizations. Representatives of the pagan association said they intended to appeal the verdict to the Supreme Court but had not done so by year's end.

The law mandates religious instruction in Christianity in the public schools; however, students may be exempted from attending the classes upon parental request.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There are no official groups representing Jews in the country, and the community numbers under 100 individuals.

The law establishes penalties of fines and up to two years in prison for verbal or physical assault on an individual or group based on religion. The law also establishes fines and imprisonment of up to three months for those who publicly deride or belittle the religious doctrines of a lawful religion association active in the country. There were no reports that the law was invoked during the year.

For a more detailed discussion, see the [2006 International Religious Freedom Report](#).

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

The constitution provides for these rights, and the government generally respected them in practice.

The law prohibits forced exile, and the government did not employ it.

Protection of Refugees

The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status in accordance with the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol, and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees. In practice the government provided some protection against refoulement, the return of persons to a country where they feared persecution. The government granted refugee status or asylum. The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees, but it had no fixed refugee acceptance requirements.

Asylum seekers were eligible for state-subsidized health care during the processing of their cases, which at times took a year or more. They could enroll their children in public schools after being in the country for three months, and some children of asylum seekers were enrolled in public schools during the year. Asylum seekers could also apply for work permits. However, human rights advocates criticized the law for not specifying which "significant human rights reasons" must underpin granting temporary residence (and eligibility for work permits) while asylum cases are processed, arguing that the situation created the possible appearance of arbitrary decisions. This echoed such groups' criticism of the vagueness of criteria for granting asylum.

Since 1984 only one person has been granted asylum as a political refugee. Officials rejected most asylum applications and eventually deported most applicants; however, some asylum seekers have been accepted on humanitarian grounds. The minister of justice appoints the director of immigration, who heads the deciding body for asylum cases. Some observers have asserted, as the Council of Europe commissioner for human rights did in a December 2005 report, that this hierarchy could constitute a conflict of interest. The law is ambiguous about the criteria for granting and denying asylum, and this ambiguity, combined with the low number of approved asylum applications, left unclear the considerations that are applied in adjudicating the applications of asylum seekers. The law allows for accelerated refusal of applications deemed to be "manifestly unfounded."

Asylum seekers also faced other impediments. They were not entitled to legal representation during their initial asylum interviews before the Directorate of Immigration, although legal assistance was provided for any appeals. Asylum seekers had no access to the court system. They could address appeals against negative decisions only to the Ministry of Justice.

In August 2005 CERD expressed concern about reports that border guards did not always handle asylum requests properly and encouraged the government to intensify its efforts to provide systematic training to these officials. The government did not directly respond to this concern and did not announce any action during the year to address it.

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

The constitution provides citizens the right to change their government peacefully, and citizens exercised this right in practice through periodic, free, and fair elections based on universal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

The most recent presidential election was held in 2004, when Olafur Ragnar Grimsson won 85.6 percent of the valid votes for his third term in this mostly ceremonial office. Elections to parliament in 2003 were free and fair. Center-right coalitions have governed since 1991.

There were 23 women in the 63-seat parliament and four women in the 12-member cabinet. Two of nine Supreme Court members and 13 of 38 district court judges were women. Foreigners who have resided in the country legally for five years (three years for citizens of Scandinavian countries) may vote in municipal elections. No members of minority groups held seats in the parliament.

Government Corruption and Transparency

There were no reports of government corruption during the year.

The law provides for public access to government information, and the government provided access in practice for citizens and noncitizens, including foreign media. Appeals against refusals by government authorities to grant access to materials may be referred to an information committee consisting of three persons appointed to four-year terms by the prime minister. Permanent employees of government ministries may not be members of the committee.

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

A number of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were cooperative and responsive to their views.

The Icelandic Human Rights Center acted as the country's leading human rights organization, vetting government legislation and reporting to international treaty monitoring bodies as well as promoting human rights education and research. The center was funded primarily by the government but also by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), unions, and the city of Reykjavik; it operated as an NGO. The government did not respond to criticism from CERD and the COE commissioner for human rights in 2005 regarding its decision to cease direct support for the center's operating expenses, but it continued to provide grants to the center for specific initiatives.

The government cooperated with international organizations and permitted visits by the ICRC.

An independent ombudsman, elected by parliament, monitored and reported to national and local authorities on human rights developments to ensure that residents, whether citizens or aliens, received equal protection. Individuals could lodge complaints with the ombudsman regarding decisions, procedures, and conduct of public officials and government agencies. The ombudsman may demand official reports, documents, and records, may summon officials to give testimony, and has access to official premises. He continued to complain during the year that government agencies were responded slowly to requests for information and documents, causing delays in his handling of cases. By year's end the government had not responded to these complaints. While the ombudsman's conclusions are not binding on authorities, his recommendations were generally followed. There was also a children's ombudsman (see section 5).

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The constitution provides that everyone shall be equal before the law and enjoy human rights irrespective of gender, race, social status, or language. Various laws implement these principles, and the government effectively enforced them.

Women

The law prohibits domestic violence; however, violence against women continued to be a problem. Police statistics indicated that the incidence of reported violence against women, including rape and sexual assault, was low; however, the number of women seeking medical and counseling assistance indicated that many incidents went unreported. During the year 99 women sought temporary lodging at the country's shelter for women, mainly because of domestic violence. The shelter offered counseling to 219 clients. Also during the year, 143 women sought assistance at the National Hospital's Rape Crisis Center.

Legislation enacted in April permits judges to increase the sentences of persons who committed violence against persons with whom they had a domestic relationship or other close bond. Neither the Ministry of Justice nor the Office of the State Prosecutor maintained statistics on prosecutions and convictions for domestic abuse.

The government helped finance various facilities and organizations that provided assistance to victims of violence. In addition to partially funding such services, the government provided help to immigrant women in abusive relationships, offering emergency accommodation, counseling, and information on legal rights. Courts could issue restraining orders, but there were complaints that police were reluctant to recommend them and that courts granted them only in extreme circumstances. Victims of sexual crimes were entitled to lawyers to advise them of their legal rights and help them pursue cases against the alleged assailants; however, a large majority of victims declined to press charges or chose to forgo trial, in part to avoid unwanted publicity. Some local human rights monitors also attributed underreporting to the infrequency of convictions, due to the heavy burden of proof and to traditionally light sentences. While average sentences for domestic violence showed a gradual increase, the courts continued in many cases to base sentences on precedent and rarely made full use of the more stringent sentences available under the law. According to statistics from the Women's Shelter, 19 percent of their clients pressed charges during the year, up from 13 percent in 2005.

In September the government set into motion a plan for reducing domestic and sexual violence against women and children during the years 2006-11. Its main goals were: to increase preventive measures that should encourage an open debate on violence against children and gender-based violence, as well as foster a shift in societal attitudes; to train and encourage staff in all public institutions to recognize the symptoms of violence against children and gender-based violence; to provide victims of domestic or sexual violence with proper care; and to break the "circle of violence" by stepping up therapy options for perpetrators.

Rape carries a maximum penalty of 16 years in prison. Judges typically imposed sentences of one to three years. Spousal rape is not explicitly addressed in the law. In 2005 the Icelandic Counseling and Information Center for Survivors of Sexual Violence in Reykjavik noted that the number of reported rapes rose faster than the number of convictions when compared to previous years. In March 2005 the UN Human Rights Committee expressed concern that what it considered a heavy burden of proof for rape complainants was leading to a low conviction rate. The government did not address this point in its response to the committee's concerns.

Prostitution was legal but rare. It was illegal to engage in prostitution as a main source of income or to act as an intermediary in the sale or procurement of sex.

There were concerns that some foreign women were trafficked to work as exotic dancers or in massage parlors where sexual services are offered (see section 5, Trafficking).

The law prohibits sexual harassment and stipulates that violations are punishable by fines; however, the law was not effectively enforced in practice. There was no central authority that plaintiffs could report to, or from which they could seek redress, and employers were free to decide whether to provide their employees with information on the legal prohibitions against sexual harassment in the workplace. While gender equality advocates reported receiving several complaints a year, the charges never became court cases, suggesting that victims were unsure how to proceed with their claims and skeptical as to their reception.

Women enjoy the same legal rights as men, including under family law, property law, and the judicial system. Despite laws that require equal pay for equal work, a pay gap existed between men and women. According to a study commissioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs, during the year women on average earned 15.7 percent less than men in the same professions. Affirmative action provisions in the law state that if women are underrepresented in a certain profession, employers have an obligation to hire female candidates over equally qualified male candidates.

The government continued to fund a center for promoting gender equality to administer the Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men. The center also provided gender equality counseling and education to national and municipal authorities, institutions, companies, individuals, and NGOs. The minister of social affairs appoints members of a Complaints Committee on Equal Status, which adjudicates alleged violations of the act; the committee's rulings are nonreviewable. The minister of social affairs appoints an Equal Status Council, with nine members drawn from national women's organizations, the University of Iceland, and labor and professional groups, which makes recommendations for equalizing the status of men and women in the labor market.

During the year the Complaints Committee on Equal Status decided 13 cases involving hiring during the year and found that the law on equal rights had been breached in two of them. Both involved the public University of Iceland where authorities hired male rather than female candidates for openly advertised positions. In one case in June, the complaints committee ruled that the rector's appointment of an associate professor represented gender bias and observed that the rector had not provided an adequate explanation for appointing a man instead of a woman (in August the female candidate was hired as a professor at Reykjavik University, a private institution). In the second case, the complaints committee ruled in December that the hiring of a male candidate for a research position similarly represented gender bias and was in breach of the law.

In June parliament amended the law on public corporations to place greater emphasis on gender representation on their boards of directors.

Children

The government was strongly committed to children's rights and welfare; it funded public education and health care. School attendance is compulsory through the age of 15 and free through public university level. According to government-published statistics for 2005, approximately 94 percent of students continued to advanced secondary education.

The government provided free prenatal and infant medical care, as well as heavily subsidized childcare; girls and boys had equal access to these services.

There were reports of abuse of children during the year. The Agency for Child Protection received 1,047 reports of abuse. Of these 353 cited emotional abuse, 385 were related to physical abuse, and 317 to sexual abuse. The agency operated seven treatment centers and a diagnostic facility for abused and troubled minors. It also coordinated the work of 32 committees throughout the country that were responsible for managing child protection issues (for example, foster care) in their local areas. The local committees hired professionals knowledgeable about sexual abuse.

In an effort to accelerate prosecution of child sexual abuse cases and lessen trauma to the child, the government maintained a children's assessment center (Barnahus). During the year the center conducted 194 investigative interviews, 117 children underwent assessment and therapy, and 14 medical examinations were performed. The center was intended to create a safe and secure environment where child victims might feel more comfortable talking about what happened to them. It brought together police, prosecutors, judges, doctors, and officials from child protection services. District court judges were not required to use the center and could hold investigatory interviews in the courthouse instead, a practice that concerned some children's rights advocates. In practice all district courts except for the Reykjavik District Court opted to use the center's services. In September, in response to public complaints by the Agency for Child Protection, the presiding judge for the Reykjavik District Court responded that the court had sufficient staff expertise and did not require the center's services.

The children's ombudsman, who is appointed by the prime minister but acts independently of the government, fulfilled her mandate to protect children's rights, interests, and welfare by, among other things, seeking to influence legislation, government decisions, and public attitudes. When investigating complaints, which typically involved physical and psychological abuse and inadequate accommodation for children with illnesses or disabilities, the ombudsman had access to all public and private institutions and associations that house children or otherwise care for them; however, the ombudsman's conclusions were not legally binding. The ombudsman was not empowered to address individual cases.

Trafficking in Persons

Law prohibits trafficking in persons; however, there were isolated reports that persons were trafficked to, through, and possibly from, the country.

Although information about trafficking is based on hearsay, the total number of cases during the year was under 100. Cases fell into several categories, none of which involved more than a few documented victims: young Asian men and women caught while being trafficked via Keflavik International Airport; "mail-order" or "Internet" brides (both Eastern European and Asian) trapped with abusive, controlling Icelandic

husbands; and underpaid or mistreated prostitutes and workers in nightclubs and massage parlors.

There were reports of foreign women, married to local men, who lived in conditions akin to slavery. These women worked long hours, and their husbands took their salaries, and some of the men sold the sexual services of their wives.

In January a Chinese citizen won a civil suit of approximately \$71,000 (4.7 million krona) for unpaid wages for administering therapeutic massages at a Kopavogur massage parlor.

Responsibility for efforts to prevent and punish trafficking lay mainly with the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Justice; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was also involved in antitrafficking efforts.

Women's aid groups reported that there was evidence that foreign women were trafficked to the country primarily to work in striptease clubs or massage parlors offering sexual services. A number of municipalities have banned private clubs that feature dancing, believed to serve as a front for prostitution and possibly trafficking, but clubs appeared able to circumvent the regulations with impunity. One club marketed private dances on its Web site and in full-page newspaper advertisements that depicted a seminude woman reclining on a bed. The Baltic countries were the main countries of origin for women working in such clubs and parlors, with others coming from Central and Eastern Europe and Russia. There were no statistics on the number or origin of women actually trafficked. To work as an exotic dancer, any person from outside the European Economic Area (EEA) must first obtain a work permit, which is typically valid for three months. Social workers suspected that most foreign women working in this field came from within the EEA and were thus impossible to track through work permit applications. A specialist at the Intercultural Center stated in a newspaper interview that one or more foreign women sought assistance at the center every week to protect themselves from violence caused by an abusive husband or boyfriend. Two of the women interviewed during the year said their husbands had forced them into prostitution.

The law prohibits trafficking in persons with the aim of sexual abuse or forced labor and provides for imprisonment of up to eight years for those found guilty of these offenses. During the year police did not charge any persons with trafficking.

Although the government sought to clamp down on elements of the sex industry thought to be primary venues for victims of trafficking, there was no coordinated government effort to investigate the trafficking phenomenon outside of the general context of increased government efforts to combat organized crime, and no public officials were specifically designated to prosecute trafficking cases, which senior officials described as very few. During the year the government reorganized the national police to provide more effective analysis and investigation against organized crime and sexual offenses, to include prostitution and trafficking. The minister of justice called for further efforts to combat such crimes.

The government provided funding for the Women's Shelter (Stigamot), the country's counseling and information center for survivors of sexual violence, and the rape crisis center of the National Hospital, whose services included assistance to victims of trafficking. However, there was no established government assistance program specifically for victims of trafficking. Some NGOs provided government-supported counseling and shelter to women and children who were victims of violence or sexual abuse, including victims of trafficking. The Human Rights Center and Intercultural Center were also available to assist with trafficking cases and make referrals.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities, and there were no reports of official discrimination in employment, education, access to health care, or the provision of other state services. The law also provides that persons with disabilities receive preference for government jobs when they are at least as qualified as other applicants; however, advocates for persons with disabilities asserted that the law was not fully implemented and that such persons constituted a majority of the country's poor.

Building regulations require that public accommodations and government buildings, including elevators, be accessible to persons in wheelchairs, that public property managers reserve 1 percent of parking spaces (a minimum of one space) for persons with disabilities, and that sidewalks outside the main entrance of such buildings be kept clear of ice and snow to the extent possible. Violations of these regulations are punishable by a fine or a jail sentence of up to two years; however, the main association for persons with disabilities complained that this regulation was not regularly enforced and that authorities rarely assessed penalties for noncompliance.

Some mental health advocates criticized the government for not devoting sufficient attention and resources to the care of persons with mental disabilities. Although the law provides them with rights to a number of services at no cost, a large number of persons with mental disabilities remained on waiting lists for housing, education, and employment programs. Advocates alleged that government funding for the care of persons with mental disabilities was inadequate and that the government-financed health system funded too few hospital places for acute patients and thus exacerbated a shortage of publicly funded preventative and follow-up mental health care.

In October the government initiated an action plan for the years 2006-10 to strengthen residential services such as group homes for those with mental disabilities. The action plan also covers support services such as rehabilitation and employment participation. The 2007 government budget enacted in December contained funding increases to initiate several of the projects covered by the plan.

The Ministry of Social Affairs was the lead government body responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. It coordinated the work of six regional offices that provided services and support to persons with disabilities. It also maintained a diagnostic and advisory center in Reykjavik that aimed to create conditions allowing persons with disabilities to lead normal lives.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Immigrants were visible in the largely homogeneous population and suffered occasional incidents of harassment based on their race and ethnicity.

The Immigrant Council, established in November 2005 to coordinate the work of four ministries and the municipalities on immigrant and refugee issues, began its work in May. The council began gathering statistical data on immigration and coordinating outreach efforts to assist immigrants, including refugees, to integrate successfully.

An April poll indicated that a third of respondents would consider voting for a party with an anti-immigrant platform if one were to be established. Most "anti-immigrant" respondents were in their late teens or early twenties, were not highly educated, and lived in the Reykjavik suburbs.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The law allows workers to form and join unions of their choice without previous authorization or excessive requirements, and workers exercised these rights. Labor unions were independent of the government and political parties. Approximately 85 percent of all eligible workers belonged to unions.

The law requires employers to withhold union dues (1 percent gross pay) from the pay of all employees, regardless of their union status, to help support disability, strike, and pension funds, and to finance other benefits to which all workers are entitled.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The law allows unions to conduct their activities without interference, and the government protected this right in practice. The law allows workers to bargain collectively, and workers exercised this right in practice. Nearly 100 percent of the workforce was covered by collective bargaining agreements. Workers had the right to strike and exercised this right in practice.

There were no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, including by children, and there were no reports that such practices occurred.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The government effectively implemented laws and policies to protect children from exploitation in the workplace. The law prohibits the employment of children younger than age 16 in factories, on ships, or in other places that are hazardous or require hard labor; this prohibition was observed in practice. Children 14 or 15 years old may work part-time or during school vacations in light, nonhazardous occupations. Their work hours must not exceed the ordinary work hours of adults in the same occupation. The Administration of Occupational Safety and Health enforced child labor regulations effectively.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The law does not establish a minimum wage, but the minimum wages negotiated in various collectively bargained agreements applied automatically to all employees in those occupations, regardless of union membership. While the agreements can be either industry- or sector-wide, or in some cases firm-specific, the minimum wage levels are occupation-specific. Labor contracts provided a decent standard of living for a worker and family.

The standard legal workweek was 40 hours, which included nearly three hours of paid breaks a week. Work exceeding eight hours in a workday must be compensated as overtime. Workers were entitled to 11 hours of rest within each 24-hour period and to a day off every week. Under special defined circumstances, employers may reduce the 11-hour rest period to no less than eight hours, but they then must compensate workers with one and a half hours of rest for every hour of reduction. They may also postpone a worker's day off by a week. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration effectively enforced these regulations.

There were indications that immigrant workers received substandard treatment. The media and labor organizations reported that a number of immigrant workers were paid wages well below union-mandated minimum, were denied medical coverage, and were required to work very long hours while living in substandard housing or even sleeping on building sites. Judging by anecdotal evidence from press accounts, such cases may have numbered in the dozens. The country's labor unions took the lead in investigating and protesting this mistreatment. They began inspecting conditions at work sites, including construction sites and restaurants, noting the number and nationality of workers employed. Citizen employees reported to their unions on working conditions and treatment of foreigners, and this practice acted as a check on mistreatment. In December 2005 parliament passed legislation to regulate temporary-work agencies that imported laborers and to protect their employees. Protective measures included prohibiting the agencies from charging the employees, in addition to the employers, for their services; requiring that the agencies establish written contracts with workers specifying the work to be performed; and giving employees the right to change employers. The Directorate of Labor of the Ministry of Social Affairs was charged with enforcing the new law.

The legislature set health and safety standards, and the Ministry of Social Affairs administered and enforced them through its administration of occupational safety and health. The ministry could close workplaces until they met safety and health standards. Workers had a collective, but not individual, right to refuse to work at a job that did not meet occupational safety and health criteria. It is illegal to fire workers who report unsafe or unhealthy conditions.