



Government statement to Parliament on promoting equality, gender equality and non-discrimination in Finnish society

FINNISH GOVERNMENT 2023



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In its Programme, the Government has committed to respect for democracy, the rule of law and human rights. The Government has pledged to promote equality and non-discrimination and to reduce racism. The Government wants to engage all of Finnish society in this task. Everyone can participate in building a Finland where we can all live in safety and be accepted for who we are.

The Government is submitting a statement to Parliament on promoting equality and non-discrimination. The statement is based on the Government Programme and work done by previous governments and will provide a foundation for work to be done by future ones. Equality, non-discrimination and the elimination of racism require action—today and in the future. No single government can complete the work, but every government has the obligation to do its best.

Historically, Finland's strength has been that, as a small country, we have been able to find common ground. Even people who disagree have been able to sit at the same table. We ensure the realisation of freedom of expression, which is an important value in a democratic society. We must be able to talk with one another about difficult subjects. Ministers, members of Parliament and other political actors have a particular responsibility in this regard. This applies to both creating the atmosphere for debate in society and being respectful of one another. Rather than escalation and divisiveness, we must try to find common ground.

There are discriminatory attitudes and structures in Finnish society—for example, on the labour market and in education—that must be changed. This change will require honest debate and actions arising from such debate. This is a task that this Government is prepared to take on.

This statement will ensure that Parliament can engage in a thorough parliamentary debate on the Government's policy and plans to promote equality, gender equality and non-discrimination in Finnish society.

About 100 representatives of civil society organisations, researchers and other parties were consulted as part of the process of drafting this statement. These consultations led to specifications being made to measures that were already agreed in the Government Programme. The statement consists of two parts. The first provides background and describes the Government's policy. The second describes the Government's actions in more concrete terms. The statement is mainly focused on combating racism and only briefly addresses other aspects of equality. The statement will be put into concrete practice through an action plan.

The Government understands the concept of racism as follows:

Racism means defining individuals or groups of people as being inferior based on ethnic origin, skin colour, nationality, culture, native language or religion. Racism can manifest in society as discriminatory norms and practices, for example, at work. Racism can manifest between individuals and groups as discriminatory behaviour. Prejudice between individuals and groups and fear of the unfamiliar can serve as a breeding ground for racism. Racism creates inequality and not only damages its targets, but all of society.

1.1 Finnish legislation at a good level overall

Finnish legislation provides a solid legal foundation for promoting equality. Finland has historically been a leader in social equality, the rule of law and improving opportunities for individuals to lead a life of dignity. This legacy obligates the Government as it works to promote equality and gender equality.

Under the Constitution of Finland, everyone is equal before the law. No one is, without an acceptable reason, to be treated differently from other persons on the grounds of sex, age, origin, language, religion, conviction, opinion, health, disability or other reason that concerns his or her person. The Constitution

also states that the Sami, as an indigenous people, as well as the Roma and other groups, have the right to maintain and develop their own language and culture. Public authorities must guarantee the realisation of fundamental and human rights.

Together with the international human rights treaties that Finland has committed itself to, the Constitution guarantees equal treatment before the law for everyone, regardless of what group or minority they may belong to. People belonging to minorities must be guaranteed equal opportunities to participate in education, work and society in general. Fundamental and human rights apply to both the majority and to minorities.

The Act on Equality between Women and Men prohibits discrimination based on gender, and the Non-Discrimination Act prohibits discrimination based on other reasons. Finnish legislation has recently been amended, for example, to improve the effectiveness of addressing discrimination at work. Numerous other acts and decrees also regulate the promotion of equality, gender equality and non-discrimination. The Criminal Code prohibits discrimination based on, for example, race or religion and safeguards the sanctity of religion, which may make it possible, for example, to prohibit the public burning of the Bible or the Qur'an.

Based on the consultation round, the Government is of the opinion that Finnish legislation is at a good level overall. Shortcomings in the realisation of equality are more due to inadequate implementation and enforcement of legislation. This being the case, the Government will focus more on measures that can promote equality and gender equality in practice. There are, naturally, still some specific issues that need to be addressed in legislation.

1.2 Finland to continue its long-term policies in the EU and internationally

The European Union is Finland's most important political and economic frame of reference and community of values. The values on which the Union is founded are defined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). They are respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law and respect for human rights, including rights of persons belonging to minorities.

Finland has implemented EU legislation that promotes equality. Negotiations are currently under way in the EU on strengthening equality legislation. An anti-discrimination directive, directives on equality bodies and a proposal for a regulation on the recognition of parenthood are under preparation. Finland is actively taking part in shaping the future content of this legislation and will pursue the objectives of the Government Programme on enhancing Finland's ability to exercise influence within the EU.

In the EU, the Council Framework Decision on Combating Racism and Xenophobia provides a general framework. In addition, several strategies are being implemented to support equality and efforts to combat racism. These include the EU Anti-racism Action Plan 2020–2025, the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024, the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020–2025 and the EU Strategy on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Life 2021–2030. The Commission has also encouraged Member States to pursue their own national strategies. The EU also has several financial instruments that Finland has used in this context.

According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, racism continued to pose serious challenges across the EU in 2022.¹ The EU report raised concerns about growing online hate speech.

Finland has consistently stood, and during this Government term will continue to stand, with those Member States that are building a Union that promotes equality and combats racism. In action outside the EU, Finland emphasises the promotion of equality, gender equality and non-discrimination and work to combat racism.

Finland is a party to the key human rights treaties of the UN and Council of Europe. As such, Finland is obligated to respect, defend and implement human rights for all without discrimination. These treaties are based on the principles of non-discrimination and the equality of all people². They lay down the minimum level for the rights of individuals or groups. National fundamental rights and legislation can provide citizens better protection. Finland submits periodic reports on the implementation of human rights conventions and receives recommendations from impartial monitoring bodies.

¹ https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2023-fundamental-rights-report-2023-opinions_en.pdf

² <https://um.fi/human-rights-conventions-and-reporting>

The recommendations Finland has received on the subject matter of this statement bring up the following issues:

- strengthening the legal and institutional framework for combating discrimination; increasing and developing education on human rights, equality and gender sensitivity;
- combating racist, homophobic, sexist, misogynistic and otherwise gendered hate speech both online and offline;
- obstacles and challenges facing the realisation of effective equality at work; and
- discrimination in the structures of society that manifests, for example, as violence against women and discrimination against Sami, Roma, people with disabilities, people belonging to sexual and gender minorities and people with a foreign background. Different grounds for discrimination sometimes intersect, which requires particular attention.

The prevention of hate speech in particular has been highlighted in the most recent recommendations.

Finland's foreign and security policy is based on the rule of law, human rights, equality and democracy. Internationally, the Government will continue Finland's long-standing policy, which is described, for example, in the Government Report on Human Rights Policy³. The report stresses the importance of strengthening non-discrimination, gender equality and participatory rights.

Finland will be a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council until the end of 2024 and will hold the OSCE Chairpersonship and the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2025. These international roles create opportunities for effective multilateral cooperation in the promotion and defence of human rights.

³ <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-383-637-2>

1.3 Government policy and the Government Programme

The Government Programme is a programme of reforms based on the key principles that work and entrepreneurship should be rewarding and profitable. Work is part of effective integration. The employment rate in all population groups will be raised by reforming the labour market and removing welfare traps. Immigrants and people from an immigrant background are seen as diverse and active participants. Every person living in Finland not only has rights, but also an obligation to contribute to society.

The Government is committed to promoting equality between groups and individuals on a broad front. Discrimination is unacceptable. There can be no room for racism in Finland.

The Government makes every effort to advance equality and non-discrimination in accordance with the principles set out in the Government Programme. In its work, the Government has zero tolerance toward racism. The Government and each of its ministers denounce racism and oppose all forms of extremism and in their work commit to actively combating racism both in Finland and internationally.⁴

This is outlined in the Government Programme as follows:

Finland promotes the implementation of democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental and human rights. A society built on trust and good relations between population groups arises from the fact that everyone in Finland can trust that their rights and the principles of gender equality, equality before the law and non-discrimination will be respected and that they will be able to improve their own lives.

The Government will take determined measures to promote equality, gender equality and non-discrimination in society. Everyone has the right to be happy and safe in Finland regardless of their background.

⁴ https://valtioneuvosto.fi/-/10616/hallituspuolueiden-puheenjohtajien-julkilausuma-11.7.2023?languageId=en_US

Everyone is equal before the law. No one may be discriminated against based on their gender, age, ethnic or national origin, nationality, language, religion or belief, opinion, disability, state of health, sexual orientation or any other personal characteristics.

In addition to the entries above, the Government Programme includes several detailed entries that have a link to this statement. For example, an action plan will be implemented to increase the participation of under-represented groups in working life, such as persons with disabilities, Roma, various immigrant groups, and immigrant women. Similarly, the Government Programme includes the objective of strengthening the equitable realisation of the fundamental educational rights of all children. The Government Programme also states that the right to self-determination and the human rights and equality of persons with disabilities must be honoured in policymaking throughout their lives, and the smooth running of their daily lives must be ensured when designing any services. This statement does not list all of the Government Programme's entries on this subject in detail. The Government is aware that different cities and regions have different circumstances. Discussions on the promotion of non-discrimination, including the prevention of segregation, will be continued in the network of major cities.

The Government will draw up a cross-administrative action plan for gender equality. The common goals of the Report on Gender Equality Policy⁵ will be updated and promoted based on the policies outlined in the action plan. The Government will continue efforts to prevent violence against women, which is one of Finland's largest gender equality problems. Under the Government Programme, more attention will be paid to gender equality issues affecting boys and men, especially in order to prevent the social exclusion of young men. There are also several other programmes that are currently being prepared or implemented that are linked to the promotion of equality and gender equality, for example, the National Programme on Ageing, which will have a strong focus on age discrimination.

⁵ <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-383-590-0>

1.4 Government to use An Equal Finland action plan in its efforts

The EU Anti-racism Action Plan calls for national action plans. Finland's action plan is called An Equal Finland and was published in 2021⁶. The plan is based on a situation assessment, and it includes 8 key objectives and 52 measures. Nearly all of the measures have been implemented, but the objectives remain relevant today.

The following perspectives were repeatedly brought up in the consultations conducted in connection with the preparation of this statement:

- dismantling social structures in the labour market and elsewhere in society that lead to inequality;
- fostering good relations between population groups;
- the key importance of access to the labour market;
- the need to build up the knowledge base on racism; and
- few needs to amend legislation were proposed.

In its own efforts, the Government will rely on the extensive analysis carried out when drafting the Equal Finland action plan and on the objections of the programme that grew out of that analysis. An evaluation has been conducted of the action plan. According to the evaluation, the funding of the action plan should not rely solely on project funding, and political leadership should allocate sufficient resources to the plan. The previous government only allocated limited appropriations to the implementation of the action plan.

⁶ <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-259-813-4>

2 Government actions

The Government is preparing to continue the Equal Finland action plan on the basis of the Government Programme. The Prime Minister and the Prime Minister's Office will lead the preparation of the plan and the coordination and monitoring of measures under the plan. In the government budget session, the Government will allocate sufficient resources to the measures within the spending limits.

The EU Anti-racism Action Plan 2020–2025 will be taken into account when drawing up the Government's plan. The Government will assess the situation and the need for further measures in its mid-term policy review session in 2025. The continuing work under the plan will be carried out in a way that encourages broad participation and will make use of the consultations carried out in the preparation of this statement. The continuation of the action plan will include the following measures:

Social atmosphere and debate, increasing awareness, good relations between population groups

1. The Prime Minister's Office will bring together anti-discrimination expertise under the Prime Minister. The aim is to improve the effectiveness of cooperation between public authorities and other parties promoting non-discrimination. The knowledge base on non-discrimination and racism will be improved.
2. The Government will launch an annual round-table discussion led by the Prime Minister on promoting equality and non-discrimination.
3. The Prime Minister's Office will launch an anti-racism campaign. The campaign will be carried out in cooperation with labour market, sports, cultural and non-governmental organisations.
4. The Government will support the work done by the Advisory Board for Ethnic Relations (ETNO) and regional ETNOs to promote good relations between population groups.
5. The Government will improve dialogue with non-governmental organisations. The Government will prepare a strategy on civil society organisations and an implementation plan for it as laid down in the Government Programme.
6. The Government will effectively combat practices that incite discrimination, persecution, hate or violence against individuals or groups based on ethnic origin, nationality, religion or other similar characteristics.

7. Honour-based violence will be identified and combated as set out in the Government Programme.
8. The systematic harassment and persecution of public officials, judges and other public figures will be prevented and sufficient support for victims of such actions will be ensured. For example, this could involve measures by employers if a person is targeted by harassment and persecution due to their office or position.
9. The Government will strengthen preventive police work and will expand and improve the effectiveness of the current multi-professional early intervention model (Anchor model). The Government will take measures to reduce juvenile and gang crime that will be specified as work progresses. This work requires multi-professional expertise.

Education system and culture, sports, physical activity and youth policy

10. As part of a cross-administrative action plan for gender equality, the Government will launch an equality and gender equality programme covering the entire education system in 2024–2025. The programme will support educational institutions in the practical implementation of their current equality and gender equality plans in the day-to-day activities of early childhood education and care and educational institutions.
11. As stated in the Government Programme, the Government will raise the participation rate of children with an immigrant background in early childhood education and care, as this will support the integration and language learning of the entire family. The level of appropriations for equality funding to be used in early childhood education and care and basic education will be put on a permanent footing.
12. The Government will support the realisation of equality, non-discrimination, gender equality and human rights through measures in the field of culture, sports, physical activity and youth policy. The Government will focus on increasing participation among young people with immigrant backgrounds, young people with disabilities and young people who belong to other minority groups. As stated in the Government Programme, the Government will broaden and entrench the 'You are not alone' service.

Equality and non-discrimination at work

The Government Programme includes numerous entries relating to work. The Government's policy is for people to integrate into Finnish society through work.

13. The Government will cooperate with labour market organisations to promote non-discrimination, diversity and equal opportunities at work. Equality of opportunities will be improved. Services that combat recruiting discrimination and develop diversity management will be incorporated into business services.
14. The transition of female immigrants into the labour market will be promoted through measures that reduce gender and ethnic stereotypes at work and in career guidance and that promote equality in families.
15. The ability of organisations to support the workplace wellbeing of employees facing discrimination and racism will be improved, for example, by directing support to them and making use of online and other training for professionals.

Legislative projects and studies

16. The work of the Sami Truth and Reconciliation Commission will continue in accordance with the Government Programme until the end of 2025. The work of the commission of people who are deaf or use sign language will be carried out. In accordance with the Government Programme, the government proposal for the Act on the Sami Parliament will be submitted in cooperation with the Sami Parliament by the end of 2023.
17. The Government Programme states that, in order to prevent the exploitation of employees, the punishments for abuse will be made significantly more severe and supervision will be improved.
18. Acts motivated by hate against Jews, Muslims, Christians and other religious groups will be prevented. Holocaust denial will be criminalised. International Holocaust Remembrance Day will be observed in accordance with international practices. The possibility of criminalising the use of at least Nazi and communist symbols to promote ideology will be investigated.

Internal measures taken in Government and administration

The Government will intensify its efforts to promote equality, gender equality and non-discrimination and to intensify the monitoring of measures taken.

19. The Government will annually review the decisions, conclusions and recommendations issued to Finland by international bodies monitoring human rights and decide on measures to be taken.
20. In international contexts, Finland will continue its long-term human rights policy of promoting and defending the rights of, e.g. women, girls, people with disabilities, indigenous peoples, gender and sexual minorities, and other people in particularly vulnerable positions. In the EU, Finland will continue its above policy of promoting gender equality, including the right to self-determination (SRHR), and matters concerning sexual and gender minorities.
21. Equality, gender equality and non-discrimination competence of personnel in the education sector and the healthcare and welfare sector will be improved.
22. Equality and gender equality training will be used to increase awareness among political leadership and senior public officials. Equality and gender equality will be promoted through the performance guidance of the ministries.
23. As an employer, the Government will pay particular attention to equal opportunities and diversity, for example, in recruiting and job advertisements. The aim is to create equal jobseeking opportunities for people belonging to minority groups. The knowledge produced by trials of anonymous recruiting will be put to use in accordance with the Government Programme.