**Universal Periodic Review – Iceland**

**Third Cycle**

Tuesday, January 25, 2022



*Ms. Katrín Jakobsdóttir, Prime Minister of Iceland*

Mr. President and Distinguished Delegates,

It is an honour to open the Universal Periodic Review of Iceland. The promotion and protection of human rights is a core priority for the government of Iceland, in both domestic and foreign policies. We firmly uphold the principle that human rights are universal, and we strive to see this reflected in all areas of Icelandic society.

International cooperation is a critical component of promoting and implementing human rights for all. This is especially vital now in the context of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and the increased polarization we see around the world.

We have seen a significant global backlash against human rights, with an alarming rise in nationalism, racism, religious intolerance, homophobia, and transphobia. We have also witnessed increased hate speech and a pushback on the gains that have been made towards gender equality and women’s reproductive rights.

We must reverse and fight these trends and work together to secure the human rights of all people, all around the world.

The UPR offers a unique platform for UN Member States to work together and take joint responsibility for the advancement of human rights, both domestically and internationally. The frank exchange with civil society within the process is also invaluable.

This review is an opportunity to discuss our own human rights record with fellow Member States. New challenges to human rights continue to rise and we, as all other countries, benefit from new perspectives on where we can do better. We therefore look forward to hearing your recommendations.

In that spirit, we have actively participated in the review of other countries. By the same token, we should regularly hold ourselves to account, take stock, and learn from others – the UPR offers an exceptional opportunity to do just that.

Mr. President,

Iceland respects the UPR’s core concept of broad stakeholder consultations. This is reflected in our efforts to strengthen the preparation process throughout this third cycle.

A central part of this was the establishment of a *Government Steering Committee on Human Rights*, which since 2017 has served as a formal platform for human rights consultation and cooperation across all ministries. The Committee followed up on the implementation of all recommendations from the previous cycle and ensured improved access to information on their status and progress.

We closely involved Icelandic civil society in the review process. We held regular open consultations, and throughout the process, stakeholders were invited to submit comments and proposals. However, due to the pandemic, much of the consultations took place in a virtual format.

A vital part of the consultation process was the involvement of children and young people, with the *Youth Council for the Sustainable Development Goals* playing an important role.

The input of children and young people was invaluable. They called for increased attention to the impact of the climate crisis on human rights and raised the issue of rising inequalities and global justice.

Mr. President,

Iceland’s national report, presented here today, focuses on the implementation of recommendations from our last review and the many achievements we have reached, and outlines where we think there is room for improvement. Overall, we believe it accurately reflects the government of Iceland’s firm commitment to advance human rights in all spheres of society.

Now, I will share with you some highlights and address some of the questions we received from member states in advance of this meeting.

**First: Iceland continues to make steady progress towards institutionalizing the promotion and respect for human rights.**

The coalition treaty of the recently re-elected government is an example of this. The treaty affirms our intention to establish a strong, independent, and effective national human rights institution, completing a process we have already started. We will ensure that the establishment of this new national human rights institution is in full accordance with the Paris Principles.

Another demonstration of the high priority given to human rights, is the recent decision to transfer the policy area of human rights from the Ministry of Justice to the Prime Minister’s Office. Subsequently, both human rights and gender equality are placed at the centre of government, which will further facilitate the mainstreaming of human rights into all administrative work.

Likewise, we plan to strengthen the *Government Steering Committee on Human Rights*, with the intention to develop a strong and comprehensive national policy on human rights.

Since our last review, Iceland has also ratified several international human rights obligations.

These include:

* the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment;
* the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence;
* the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education; and
* the UN Conventions on Statelessness.

We have also begun the process of ratifying the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

**Second: Promoting equality and non-discrimination continues to be a key priority.**

We firmly believe that progressive policies aimed at advancing gender equality are the foundation for an inclusive, just, and rights-based society where everyone can prosper. And we have been successful - Iceland has been at the top of the World Economic Forum’s gender gap index since 2009.

While we are proud of this achievement, we will not stop here, but actively continue our drive. This is based on a dedicated Government Action Plan, where gender-equality mainstreaming – including gender-equality budgeting – is an integral part of public policy.

A critical step towards gender pay parity was taken in 2018, when a ground-breaking equal pay law was implemented. Iceland became the first country in the world to require employers to obtain an equal pay certification, which ensures equal pay for equal work. This made it much harder for employers to maintain gender-based pay differences.

In 2020, we implemented a new comprehensive law on gender equality, with a first ever provision on multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. This increases legal protection for the most marginalized individuals, including women of foreign origin and women with disabilities.

Here, I would like to specifically underline Iceland’s emphasis on LGBTQI+ rights, both at home and abroad.

The opening words of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* are clear: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” We must ensure that each person is able to enjoy their human rights, regardless of sexuality, gender identity and expression, or sex characteristics.

In Iceland, we have made significant progress on advancing LGBTQI+ rights.

In 2019, a new Act on Gender Autonomy was adopted, allowing individuals full autonomy to define their own gender. The law also prohibits unnecessary surgical procedures on intersex children, protecting their bodily integrity.

Additionally, amendments have been made to the Children’s Act regarding the parental status of trans and non-binary people, to protect and respect all forms of families.

Iceland has actively promoted its LGBTQI+ rights agenda internationally, including here in the Human Rights Council. This year, we doubled our contribution to the unique Global Equality Fund, and we have also committed to contributing to the UN Free and Equal campaign for the next three years.

Iceland is also firmly committed to fighting racism, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination.

Significant steps were taken in 2018, when the Icelandic Parliament adopted two anti-discrimination laws: The Act on Equal Treatment in the Labour Market and the Act on Equal Treatment irrespective of Race and Ethnic Origin.

In addition, a comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation bill has now been presented to Parliament. This bill requires equal treatment in all areas of society and prohibits all and any discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, life stance, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics.

Increased emphasis has been placed on fighting hate speech and hate crime, including through extensive awareness raising. To that end, we will present a bill this spring where the General Penal Code will be amended to include a provision on hate crime. This bill will also give more groups protection against hate speech, including people with disabilities and intersex persons.

**Third: we are committed to further advance the rights of persons with disabilities.**

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was ratified in 2016. Since then, various amendments have been made to implement the Convention into Icelandic legislation. An example is the Act on Services for Persons with Disabilities with Long-term Support Needs, implemented in 2018, which aims to give people with disabilities the support they need to lead their lives independently on their own terms, and to fully enjoy their human rights on an equal basis with others in our society.

We are committed to fully implementing the Convention, the central goal being the self-determination and full participation of all persons with disabilities in our society. To further strengthen the status of the Convention, the decision has been made to incorporate it directly into Icelandic legislation.

**Fourth: Icelandic authorities place strong emphasis on the rights of the child.**

A new policy and action plan on a *Child-Friendly Iceland* was adopted last summer. It aims to ensure a comprehensive implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, including through strengthened child participation, child impact assessments, child-friendly budgeting, increased collection of data, and education on children’s rights at all school levels and throughout society.

Since our last UPR, Iceland has undertaken an extensive revision of laws and policies on services for children, including a new Act on the Integration of Services in the Interest of Children’s Prosperity. We also plan to create an integral policy on matters concerning children, based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international obligations.

**Fifth: we are determined to continue the fight against gender-based and sexual violence.**

Regrettably, gender-based and sexual violence remains one of ourgreatest human rights challenges. This global crisis has deepened during COVID-19, which has brought about conditions that have contributed to an alarming rise in violence against women and children.

We are firmly focused on strengthening our systems to fight gender-based and sexual violence. This includes policies on prevention and awareness raising, and new provisions in the General Penal Code to address online gender-based violence.

We have made significant efforts to ensure faster and better-quality investigations and prosecutions in gender-based and sexual violence cases, as well as in cases of human trafficking. This includes more financial resources and additional training for police and prosecutors.

In the context of COVID-19, the Government of Iceland has undertaken to minimize the societal effects of quarantine measures, in part to reduce the risk of gender-based violence and other human rights abuses. No lockdowns or curfews were imposed, and preschools and compulsory schools have predominantly stayed open throughout the pandemic. Services for victims of violence remained as open as possible and a special task force was established to coordinate actions against violence, with a special focus on women, children, and other vulnerable groups.

Combating human trafficking is a top priority for Iceland. In 2019, the Government’s policies were outlined in a National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking and Other Forms of Exploitation. This has been the foundation of a strengthened approach to preventing human trafficking, protecting survivors, and prosecuting perpetrators. On this issue, we have created enhanced partnerships and consultations across the administration and with the police.

**Lastly, we are committed to protecting the rights of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees.**

With record numbers of forcibly displaced people around the world, accelerated by the climate crisis, Iceland remains firmly committed to assisting those in need. We have a well-established asylum and protection system, which focuses specifically on the most vulnerable groups.

The Icelandic government is finalizing a new action plan and a long-term policy on immigration issues. The goal is to promote an inclusive society based on the principles of equality, justice, and respect for the human rights of all individuals.

Mr. President,

As mentioned at the outset, human rights are not only a core national priority for Iceland, but also a central element of our foreign policy.

In 2018, Iceland took a seat on the Human Rights Council for the first time, and we will continue to use the Council as a key platform to promote human rights, gender equality, rule of law and democracy. We are seeking a seat on the Council for the period 2025 to 2027.

Later this year, Iceland will chair the Council of Europe. During our chairmanship, we are determined to engage meaningfully with all members on the advancement of human rights in and beyond the region.

Mr. President,

In this opening statement, I have provided an overview of the important progress made since Iceland’s last Review. We are proud of the progress made, and thankful to the many stakeholders across Icelandic society who have been instrumental in this process.

At the same time, let me acknowledge that our work is far from over. Due to it´s nature, it will never be over. The advancement of human rights is inherently an ongoing process. New challenges are continuously emerging, calling for thoughtful and lasting solutions.

Among those, climate change is the biggest challenge of them all, the biggest challenge of our time. Not only does it pose a direct threat to lives and livelihoods, but it also has profound implications for human rights - and by extension the work of the Human Rights Council.

The fight against climate change is a core priority for the government of Iceland. It is a fight that needs to be fought on many fronts, and I welcome the recently adopted resolution of the Human Rights Council which recognizes for the first time that a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is in fact a human right.

Mr. President,

With the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we pledged to achieve, in cooperation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The UPR process is an essential manifestation of how UN Member States have come together to do just that. It has been an honour to take part in this process, for the third time now, and we look forward to receiving your recommendations.

I thank you for your attention.

*Ms. Bryndís Hlöðversdóttir, Permanent Secretary, Prime Minister´s Office*

Thank you, Mr. President, Excellencies and Distinguished Delegates,

I would like to start by thanking you all for your engagement today. It is an honour to address you on the occasion of Iceland’s third UPR.

I recognise that time will not allow us to address all the valuable questions, comments and recommendations presented to us, but we will be as comprehensive as possible and strive to leave you with an accurate picture of the current human rights situation in Iceland.

Here today, I have with me a number of representatives from several Ministries, and representatives of the Government Steering Committee on Human Rights. During the session, I will regularly pass the floor over to them. But first, allow me to provide some reflections on your comments and recommendations and address several other key issues and significant developments that have taken place in Iceland over the past five years.

**National Human Rights Institution**

I would like to start by thankingUruguay, Panama, Germany and othersfor following up in writing on the establishment of a National Human Rights Institution. We are firmly committed to establishing a strong and effective mechanism in full accordance with the Paris Principles. Since our last review, several steps have been taken to this end, including the formation of a Working Group in 2021. And in November last year, the re-elected Government included specifically the establishment in its Agreement.

**National Plan on Human Rights**

While we do not currently have a National Plan on Human Rights we have in recent years adopted a number of comprehensive and focused action plans and policies on strengthening human rights protection and awareness raising in key areas. To name a few, we have action plans on gender equality, on matters concerning people with disabilities, immigrants, gender-based violence and on all types of violence, human trafficking and on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Emphasis has also been put on data collection and evidence-based decision making in various fields, including through the development of dashboards, for example regarding children’s affairs and gender equality.

Following our last Review, a special Government Steering Committee on Human Rights was established, which serves as the formal platform for human rights consultations and cooperation across all ministries. One of the main tasks of the Steering Committee is to follow up on UPR recommendations and concluding observations from Human Rights Treaty Bodies, as well as to ensure improved access to information on their status and progress.

Last November, the policy area of human rights was transferred from the Ministry of Justice to the Prime Minister’s Office. The purpose was clear – namely, to accelerate human rights mainstreaming throughout the administration.

I would also like to stress that Iceland is committed to implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goals. This is reflected in the new Coalition Treaty, where it is stated that an extensive policy on sustainable development will be developed in line with the SDGs. Sustainability and just transition will be amongst the guiding principles when addressing the climate crisis and challenges associated with technological change.

**Ratification of UN Convention** **for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance**

Thank you to Slovenia and Belgium for enquiring about the ratification of the UN Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance. We are pleased to announce that the process is underway.

Icelandic law is based on a dualistic system, whereby national legislation is adapted to conform with international conventions ratified by Iceland. Consequently, the ratification process can take time. The Icelandic authorities emphasize their absolute devotion to continue an ambitious approach to the implementation of international human rights obligations.

**Incorporation of Human Rights Convention into Law**

In this context, I would like to address some of the questions and recommendations on directly incorporating human rights conventions into Icelandic legislation. Iceland has traditionally not incorporated international conventions in their entirety into law, but rather made the necessary legislative and administrative changes to fully comply with the relevant conventions. This is considered a more effective way to ensure the greatest compliance possible with a human rights convention. Additionally, the general principle is that domestic laws must be interpreted in accordance with international law. That being said, two human rights conventions have been directly incorporated into Icelandic law and the Government has decided to incorporate the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as a whole into Icelandic legislation.

**Optional Protocols on Communications Procedures**

I would like to make a few comments about the ratification of Optional Protocols that entail communications procedures of the respective human rights treaty bodies. During our last Review, Iceland noted recommendations regarding these Protocols; that is the Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. After careful consideration, a decision was made to ratify the third Optional Protocol on the Rights of the Child before the end of 2023. The Government intends to undertake further analysis of the content and possible impact of the other two protocols.

Thank you. I will now give the floor to my colleague from the Prime Minister’s Office.

*Senior Legal Advisor, Prime Minister´s Office*

Thank you, Permanent Secretary

Good morning, Mr. President and Distinguished Delegates.

Thank you to those that raised questions on gender equality.

Since our last Review, Iceland has developed several progressive policies and made legislative amendments aimed at advancing gender equality.

First, I would like to mention that in 2019, a Government Action Plan for Gender Equality for the period of 2020 to 2023 was adopted. Key deliverables include further promotion of gender mainstreaming, including the adoption of a comprehensive plan on gender mainstreaming in public policy and decision-making. These actions come in addition to years of gender budgeting that has ensured a more equal and just distribution of public funds.

Also, a new comprehensive law on gender equality entered into force last year. In the law the term ‘gender’ refers to women, men and persons whose gender is registered as neutral. This is the first time that gender equality laws refer to other genders than women and men.

Furthermore, the law includes the first ever provision on multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. It also includes a new provision on compulsory education on equality and gender at all school levels, including education on gender stereotypes, gender-based choices in education and work, matters concerning migrants, people with disabilities and LGBTQI+ people.

Significant steps have also been taken to strengthen the position of women in the labour market. In 2018, Iceland adopted a new law on equal pay certification to eradicate gender-based pay differences. The aim is to ensure equal pay for equal or equally valuable work for women and men. The Directorate of Equality, a Government agency, monitors compliance and implementation of the law.

Efforts are also underway to address pay differences caused by a gender-divided labour market and the systematic undervaluation of occupations that are mostly filled by women.

Furthermore, the Icelandic Government has prioritized measures to help facilitate the harmonisation of family and work life. The right to parental leave has been extended to twelve months and is divided equally between parents.

Lastly, securing women’s full sexual and reproductive health and rights is a critical component to ending gender inequalities. In that regard, Iceland passed a progressive abortion legislation in 2019 ensuring women’s self-determination over their bodies.

Thank you. I will now give the floor to my colleague from the Ministry of Justice.

*Senior Legal Advisor, Ministry of Justice*

Good morning, Mr. President and Distinguished Delegates.

Thank you to those enquiring about measures to combat gender-based and sexual violence.

The Icelandic Government has introduced several new policies and legislations in recent years, with the aim to fight gender-based and sexual violence.

An action plan on the processing of sexual offences within the justice system was adopted in 2017. To coordinate efforts in the fight against gender-based violence on the bases of the action plan, a Steering Committee was established. Iceland also responded in various ways to the #metoo movement, including by organizing an international conference in Reykjavik on the movement’s effects in 2019.

Furthermore, the Istanbul Convention entered into force in Iceland in 2018. Many steps have been taken for its implementation, including a parliamentary resolution on measures against violence and its consequences that was adopted in 2019. The resolution covers various types of violence, and a special focus is put on vulnerable groups.

Several amendments have been made to the General Penal Code to strengthen protection against sexual violence. In 2018 amendments were made to the definition of rape to increase the legal protection of victims, and rape is now defined as intercourse or other sexual relations without consent. Additionally, last year new provisions on stalking and on the protection against digital sexual violence entered into force.

A special focus has also been placed on improving the judicial system, ensuring high-quality, efficient, and fair proceedings and to increase trust in the justice system. Efforts have been made to improve victims experience of the judicial system, including by giving victims further access to information, increasing the efficiency and accessibility of reporting of cases. The Icelandic Government remains committed to improve support for victims of gender-based and sexual violence. Currently there are several service centres that provide information, assistance, and advice and since our last review, three family justice centres have been opened to give assistance to victims of violence of all genders.

Work is also ongoing to ensure coordinated procedures when victims of domestic violence seek health care and services. Training and information to health professionals is being prepared, to ensure that all victims of domestic violence will receive high quality services.

I would now like to address the issue of trafficking in human beings. Iceland is strongly committed to play its part in tackling all forms of human trafficking and has significantly increased its efforts in that regard. In 2021, amendments were made to the General Penal Code to further increase judicial protection of victims of human trafficking and to make prosecution of perpetrators easier.

In 2019, Emphases on Actions to Combat Human Trafficking and Other Forms of Exploitation were adopted. They constitute a formal National Action Plan based on the three P’s framework - prosecution, protection, and prevention - with a special focus on labour trafficking. In accordance with the plan, a National Referral Mechanism coordinating responses to suspected human trafficking was piloted in 2020, initially for a period of two years.

A human trafficking information portal has also been opened at the National Emergency Number 112. Victims can seek assistance and counselling through the portal and others can receive relevant information on human trafficking and the resources available to victims.

I will now hand over to my colleague from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

*Advisor, Ministry for Foreign Affairs*

Good morning, Mr. President and Distinguished Delegates.

Thank you for the questions raised with regards to racism, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination.

Significant steps were taken in 2018, when the Icelandic Parliament adopted two anti-discrimination laws:

First, the Act on Equal Treatment in the Labour Market that applies to the equal treatment of individuals on the labour market, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, religion, life stance, disability, reduced working capacity, age, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics. The Act includes equal treatment in access to jobs and other work-related issues.

Second, the Act on Equal Treatment irrespective of Race and Ethnic Origin that applies to all areas of society, with the exception of the labour market. It provides legal protection to individuals who believe they have faced discrimination outside the labour market, that is for example in relation to social protection, and delivery of goods and services.

Moreover, a comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation bill has recently been presented in Parliament, that will extend the aforementioned Act on Equal Treatment irrespective of Race and Ethnic Origin to ensure equal treatment in all areas of society, covering the same grounds for discrimination as the previously mentioned Act on Equal Treatment in the Labour Market.

Also, as mentioned at the outset, a new comprehensive law on Equal Status and Equal Rights Irrespective of Gender, entered into force in 2021. This law includes the first ever provision on multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, - that is discrimination on the basis of more than one reason for discrimination that protection is provided against by the equality legislation. This is an effort to better ensure the protection of the most marginalized individuals, like for example women of foreign origin and women with disabilities.

I thank you, Mr. President.

*Ms. Bryndís Hlöðversdóttir, Permanent Secretary, Prime Minister´s Office*

Thank you, Mr. President.

Excellencies and Distinguished Delegates, thank you for your valuable interventions. I will pass over to a number of colleagues that will address some of the issues raised; starting with the representative from the Ministry of Social Affairs.

*Legal Advisor, Social Affairs / Ministry of Education, Science and Culture*

Thank you, Permanent Secretary.

Good morning, Mr. President and Distinguished Delegates.

On the questions raised by Spain and others on the rights of people with disabilities, I would like to mention that there are several provisions in Icelandic legislation that aim to ensure equality, non-discrimination, and equal recognition before the law.

A number of legislative amendments have been made to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities into Icelandic legislation. As previously mentioned, a decision has also been made to incorporate the Convention as a whole into Icelandic legislation.

A new Act on Services for Persons with Disabilities that have Long-term Support Needs was adopted in 2018. The legislation aims at ensuring that people with disabilities can fully enjoy their human rights on an equal basis with others. It includes provisions for user-directed personal assistance that aims to ensure the right of people with long-term support needs to live an active and independent life.

A new institution that monitors the quality of welfare services became operational earlier this month and will monitor the quality of services for people with disabilities according to the act and other legislation.

Several measures have been implemented on the basis of an action plan adopted in 2017 on matters concerning people with disabilities, for example relating to accessibility, employment, health, education and independent living. One of the objectives of the action plan is to increase the labour market participation of people with occupational disabilities and targeted actions have been introduce to fulfil that objective, for example an ongoing project aimed at creating more jobs within the public sector for individuals with reduced working capacity.

Additionally, emphasis has been placed on a long-term vision when it comes to policy-making in matters pertaining to people with disabilities. An increased effort has been put into ensuring the involvement and active participation of people with disabilities in all matters, including with the establishment of a special Consultative Committee where the majority of the committee members are people with disabilities.

In conclusion, I would also like to mention that efforts have been made to reduce the risk of inhumane treatment of people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, including by amendments to the Patients’ Rights Act. A bill is also being finalized to clarify the legal framework and better ensure respect for human rights and the protection of people in secure custody and secure care against inhumane treatment.

I now give the floor to my colleague from the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

*Senior Advisor, Ministry of Education, Science and Culture*

Good morning, Mr. President and Distinguished Delegates.

I would like to address some issues raised regarding the rights of the child. Iceland has placed a strong emphasis on children’s rights in recent years. In 2019, a Government Steering Committee on the Rights of Children was established to increase cooperation across the administration and the title of the Minister of Social Affairs expanded to Minister of Social Affairs and Children to better reflect the government’s emphasis on children’s rights.

In recent years, an extensive revision of laws and social frameworks on matters concerning children has taken place through wide-ranging consultation and cooperation. A special focus has been placed on the participation of children during this process.

In 2021, a new Act on the Integration of Services in the Interest of Children’s Prosperity was adopted. It aims to ensure that all service providers work together to provide children and their families with the appropriate support, with a special focus on early assistance in the best interest of the child. To further strengthen the focus on the coordinated implementation of this new legislation a new Ministry of Education and Children’s Affairs is being established.

Last year, a policy and action plan on Child Friendly Iceland was adopted to further strengthen the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, including by strengthening child participation, implementing a child rights impact assessment, and increasing education about the rights of children at all school levels and throughout society. This will also include a development of an integral policy on matters concerning children and young people.

To address the important topic of violence against children, I would like to mention that various positive steps have been taken to better ensure the rights of the child within the Child Protection system, as can be seen from recent legislative amendments to the Child Protection Act.

Furthermore, an increased effort has been put into awareness raising activities, aimed at reaching the whole society, educational measures, and other actions to prevent violence against children. In addition, there has been an increased emphasis on providing victims of violence with the necessary support. Moreover, children’s access to child-friendly information, education, counselling and assistance in relation to violence has been greatly improved, for example by making it more accessible for children themselves to contact the relevant authorities.

A plan on the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence and harassment against children was adopted in 2020. One of its aims is to establish organized preventive measures, that will be integrated into teaching and school activities at all school levels.

Lastly, I would like to mention that Icelandic law requires that students at all school levels are offered inclusive education and equal rights and equal opportunity. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the importance of an inclusive and equitable access to quality education for all in line with the Sustainable Development Goals. Iceland has in recent years made significant efforts to reduce drop out rates in secondary schools and support vulnerable groups. The Government adopted a new holistic national policy on education in 2021 with the aim to safeguard and strengthen our education system.

I will now give the floor to my colleague from the Ministry of Social Affairs.

*Special Advisor, Ministry of Social Affairs*

Good morning, Mr. President and Distinguished Delegates.

I would like to address some of the questions raised on migrants, asylum seekers and refugees

The number of people seeking international protection in Iceland is relatively high per capita. We received twenty-four applications per ten thousand inhabitants in 2021.

The government’s focus has been on shortening processing time of asylum applications at the same time as we safeguard the right to a fair procedure. All asylum seekers have the right to an independent attorney, assistance that is fully funded by the State. This right also encompasses an appeal process whereby applicants have a chance to appeal decisions to an independent body at the administrative level. We have seen in recent years a significant increase in granting of international and subsidiary protection. Iceland will also continue to welcome refugees through the UNHCR-led refugee resettlement program with emphasis on the most vulnerable, including female-headed households.

As the Migrant Integration Policy Index shows, Iceland has taken important steps to create a welcoming society and we strive to ensure a comprehensive approach to integration.

Also, the government has adopted a new and coordinated approach to refugee reception and integration, aimed at ensuring quicker and better inclusion of refugees into the community. This has gone hand in hand with a detailed Action Plan to further facilitate integration of all immigrants and to monitor societal perception of Iceland’s immigrant population. Next week, the Minister of Social Affairs will put forward a parliamentary resolution with a 3-year Action Plan based on five pillars; social participation, family, education, the labour market, and refugees. In the next years, a holistic policy on immigration will be developed, focusing on active participation of the immigrant population in every aspect of Icelandic society.

I will now pass over to my colleague from the Ministry of Health.

*Legal Advisor, Ministry of Health*

Good morning, Mr. President and Distinguished Delegates.

I would like to address some questions concerning the protection of economic and social rights.

Icelandic legislation aims at providing financial and social security for all people.

Child benefits have been raised in recent years and according to the Coalition Treaty of the recently re-elected Government the child benefit system will be further strengthened with the aim of equalizing the financial situation of families with children. Furthermore, efforts will be directed at equalizing opportunities for children to pursue leisure activities regardless of income, circumstances, and residence.

Regarding health, steps have been taken to increase equality within the health care system, for example by altering the co-payment systems for medicines and health care services and by increased participation in the cost of dental care for children, the elderly and people with disabilities.

Mental health services in Primary health Care have also been strengthened throughout the country with the establishment of interdisciplinary mental health teams. In 2019, a mental health team for prisoners was established, with the aim to strengthen mental health services in prisons and to ensure continuity in such services for prisoners after imprisonment.

Regarding the questions raised by the United Kingdom and others relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, I would like to emphasise that our government’s responses to the pandemic have aimed at minimising its societal effects. A special focus has been put on supporting those most adversely affected and special response teams, including a special team consisting of all stakeholders to ensure services for vulnerable groups, have been established.

An emphasis has been placed on increasing financial contributions within the welfare system during the pandemic, including through additional temporary funding ensured for mental health care services. The Government has furthermore provided extra financial support for Civil Society Organisations to enable them to increase their services to vulnerable groups. Various targeted actions have also been taken to respond to the increased risk of violence against women and children, including awareness raising activities and campaigns in several languages, aimed at reaching the whole society.

Numerous temporary measures have also been taken to counteract unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example by increasing the right to unemployment benefits.

From the start of pandemic, Iceland made a strong commitment to the fundamental right to education. We have managed to keep pre-schools and compulsory schools open with only minor restrictions. Upper secondary schools and Universities have been mostly open but at times operating by remote and distance learning and efforts have been made to prevent drop out.

I thank you.

*Ms. Bryndís Hlöðversdóttir, Permanent Secretary, Prime Minister´s Office*

Thank you, Mr. President.

Excellencies and Distinguished Delegates.

Before I close, I would like to respond to some of the issues raised.

In recent years various legislative amendments have been made to increase the protection of freedom of expression, media, and information. This includes a new Act on the Protection of Whistle-blowers in 2020 and an Act reinforcing the public’s right to information in 2019.

In parallel, the Government has placed added emphasis on ensuring the protection of privacy and protecting vulnerable groups against hate speech and hate crime, including through extensive awareness raising. The most recent example includes a joint Government and civil society campaign under the slogan *No Hate – words carry responsibility*.

Also, an Action Plan on Measures against Violence for the period 2019 to 2022 has been adopted and a bill will be presented in Parliament this spring to amend the General Penal Code to include a provision on hate crime. The same bill will also provide more groups with protection against hate speech, including people with disabilities and intersex persons, as well as one on the basis of ethnicity.

Thank you to those who raised the issue of the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals. Iceland remains strongly committed to promoting equal human rights and non-discrimination of LGBTQI+ individuals. At home, we continue to make conscious improvements within this policy area. First, let me mention the law on gender autonomy adopted in 2019. The law strengthens the rights of trans and intersex people and provides individuals the right to define their own gender, granting individuals over the age of fifteen the right to register their self-identified gender.

Moreover, further amendments were adopted in 2020 to better ensure the rights of trans and intersex individuals, including a provision on the right of intersex children to be spared from unnecessary surgical procedures, to protect their physical integrity. And last year, amendments were made to the Children’s Act to clarify the parental status of trans and non-binary parents.

Also, the first Action Plan on LGBTQI+ rights is currently being developed, with the aim of further strengthening and improving these rights.

Additionally, I would like to mention that last week, the Government increased its financial contribution to the leading LGBTQI+ organization in Iceland to increase services and reduce social isolation of marginalised individuals, with emphasis on the elderly and those seeking international protection.

In closing, on behalf of the Government of Iceland, I want to extend our gratitude to you, Mr. President, and to the Members and Observers of the Human Rights Council for your valuable recommendations and constructive comments received today.

While adhering to the framework of this process, we have aimed to address the issues raised within the time available, and will consider your recommendations with a positive and open mindset.

Mr. President,

The UPR is an important process for Iceland and today’s discussion was a valuable opportunity for us to reflect on our commitments to human rights.

We are proud of the progress made, with Iceland having a strong record in promoting human rights both at home and abroad. And as highlighted by our Delegation, we have implemented a number of strategic initiatives since our last Review to promote human rights in Iceland. We are committed to continue on this path, with the aim to make Iceland a fairer and better society to live in.

The Government of Iceland remains fully committed to continuing to implement the UPR recommendations. We will return to the recommendations in our formal reply, but I can assure you that we view the recommendations as important input for our work on human rights domestically. We will continue to involve civil society organisations in Iceland, and other stakeholders, in the follow up process.

A strong and engaging dialogue with stakeholders is crucial to ensure that all key areas of concern are addressed. I can also confirm that we will, like last time, submit a voluntary mid-term report in 2024.

Mr. President,

The advancement and promotion of human rights is inherently an ongoing process. Iceland remains firmly committed to promoting and protecting human rights and we will strive to find adequate solutions and responses as new human rights challenges arise. This includes issues pertaining to the environment, the climate crisis and climate justice.

Iceland views the Human Rights Council as the key platform for the promotion of human rights and a cornerstone of the multilateral system. We will continue to work actively with the Council to ensure that mechanisms for protecting and advancing human rights globally are strengthened.

To conclude, I would like to thank you, Mr. President, for presiding over our review this morning. Let me also thank the Troika and the Secretariat for their invaluable support, as well as States for their valuable recommendations and questions here today.

Thank you.