

International Plan of Action on Aging (MIPAA) in Iceland

The Minister of Health and Social Security is responsible by law for matters concerning the aged, and the Ministry is responsible for implementing international obligations in the field.

Special legislation on the aged was passed by Alþingi (parliament) in 1982 with the purpose of safeguarding as well as possible the rights of the elderly to services, both social and health services. Health services are provided by the state, while local government is responsible for social services. In discussion and decision-making on matters regarding the elderly, the authorities generally emphasise consultation with the organisation of the elderly. The organisation has a representative on the collaborative committee on matters of the elderly, appointed by the Minister of Health and Social Security as provided by law, which advises the authorities on matters of the elderly.

The enactment of legislation on the elderly was deemed necessary at the time, and it has undoubtedly served to draw more attention to these matters, encourage debate and improve the rights and circumstances of the elderly. The view has, however, become widespread, *inter alia* among elderly people themselves, that special legislation on matters of the elderly may lead to the group becoming isolated, and it may hinder the inclusion of issues concerning the elderly in general policy formation and action. A committee, which considered whether legislation on the elderly should be abolished, has recently completed its task; its conclusion was that this should be done, while assuring the rights of the elderly through general legislation.

The organisation of the elderly in Iceland has over 15,000 members, aged 60 years and over, in more than 50 regional associations. The associations and the national organisation work for the general interests of the elderly, such as leisure activities, education and culture, while also placing emphasis on issues which affect the financial situation of elderly people, and the circumstances of those who require nursing-home care.

The Icelandic authorities have in recent years undertaken or supported a number of projects whose aim is to reduce age-related prejudices and bridge the gap between generations. In the training of health professionals, increasing weight has been given to education in geriatric care, and study programmes have been established whose aim is to attract people to work in the care of the aged, whether in their own homes or in care homes for the elderly.

The age distribution of the Icelandic nation remains somewhat different from that of other European nations. The nation is still proportionately young, although this will change in the coming decades. People aged 65 years and older now comprise about 12% of the population, while by 2050 this proportion is expected to have risen to 27%. In this respect the trend in Iceland lags about 15 years behind that of other European nations, and the response to foreseeable changes in the age distribution of the nation is no doubt coloured by this fact. With respect to pensions, individuals have been encouraged to make additional pension contributions, and the government has introduced supplementary contributions from the employer in order to make this form of saving attractive.

Iceland is unique in its high proportion of employment of the elderly. In 2002, according to Eurostat¹ data, 36.1% of Icelanders aged 65 years or older were in employment, which is far higher than in any other country of the European Economic Area. If we consider the employment of this age group by gender, 47.8% of men are in employment and 24.4% of women. Unemployment is negligible in Iceland, and demand for labour is fairly steady, which goes some way to explain the employment of elderly people. Participation in working life by elderly people helps to make them more active in the community, and reduces social isolation. In recent years changes have been made to the taxation and social benefits systems, with the aim *inter alia* of supporting employment of the elderly still more. It should also be mentioned that Iceland is unique among the OECD nations in its high average age of retirement, which is the highest of any OECD country, for both men and women.

Retirement age in Iceland is 67 years, but people may continue to work until the age of 70 if they so choose. This applies to public employees. In recent years debate has been growing on greater flexibility, to enable people to retire earlier, or work beyond the age of 70, if they prefer. Government committees have considered these matters and reached the conclusion that flexibility of retirement age should be increased, although this has not yet been implemented.

Iceland has a state pension system which guarantees everyone a living allowance. Since 1974 all those in paid employment have been required to belong to an occupational pension fund. The number of people who have extensive pension entitlement, in addition to the state pension, is thus steadily growing.

In the past five years the conditions of senior citizens have been much discussed. The authorities, in consultation with spokespeople for senior citizens, have formulated and implemented various measures to improve the situation of the elderly. Widespread employment into old age, a strong pension system and a generally good employment situation are conducive to the elderly being quite well-off.

The financial situation of elderly women is contingent partly on whether, and for how long, they have been in employment and paid into occupational pension funds. With increasing employment of women over the years, their situation has improved in this respect.

An Act on the Equal Status and Equal Rights of Men and Women has been in effect in Iceland since 1991. The Act was amended in 2000.

The aim of the Act is to establish and maintain equal status and equal opportunities for women and men, and thus promote gender equality in all spheres of society. All individuals shall have equal opportunities to benefit from their own enterprise and to develop their skills irrespective of gender. This aim shall be reached by:

- a. gender mainstreaming in all spheres of the society,

¹ Source: Eurostat (European Social Statistics – Labour force survey results 2000, Data 2000)

- b. working on the equal influence of women and men in decision-making and policy-making in the society,
- c. enabling both women and men to reconcile their occupational and family obligations,
- d. improving especially the status of women and increasing their opportunities in the society,
- e. increasing education in matters of equality,
- f. analysing statistics according to sex.
- g. increasing research in gender studies.

Women and men who are employed by the same employer shall receive equal pay and enjoy equal terms for equal-value and comparable work.

Government measures specifically intended to equalise the status of the sexes in the work market include the enactment of legislation on paternal leave in 2001 (Act on Maternity/Paternity Leave and Parental Leave no. 95/2000). The objective of the Act is to ensure that the child spends time with both parents, and to enable both women and men to reconcile their occupational and family obligations.

In Iceland it has long been accepted policy that it is an important right for people to live an independent life on their own terms, regardless of disability or illness. The development of the health and social system has taken account of this policy in recent years, and support measures which aim to enable people to remain in their own homes for as long as possible have been increased and strengthened. This trend will no doubt continue, in accord with the declared wishes of government and the general opinion in society.

According to the reviewed objectives of the Icelandic Health Plan for the period until 2010, it is assumed that 80% of people aged 80 years and older are in sufficiently good health to live at home, with the appropriate support. In order to attain this objective, growing emphasis is placed upon promotion of health and preventive measures. Important and focussed preventive work directed at the elderly includes health-promoting visits by nurses to people of a certain age (generally 75+) to evaluate their situation and the need for improvements, assistance and service.

Population forecast 2003-2045 from Statistics Iceland

Year	2005	2015	2025	2035	2045
0-59	247,241	255,261	256,465	257,649	257,730
60-79	37,107	49,335	66,083	72,054	73,017
80+	8,885	10,957	12,214	17,925	22,669
Total	291,233	315,553	334,762	347,628	353,416