

# Gender Equality in Iceland

## Stepping Stones

- 1850 Equal inheritance rights for men and women
- 1882 Widows and single women gain local suffrage
- 1886 Girls can enter secondary school
- 1900 Married women gain the right to control their income and personal property
- 1907 Icelandic Women's Rights Association founded
- 1908 Women gain local suffrage and the right to hold local office
- 1908 The first women's list participates in local elections in Reykjavik
- 1911 Women get equal rights to grants, study and civil service
- 1914 First women workers' association founded
- 1915 Women over the age of 40 gain national suffrage and the right to hold office
- 1920 All women gain national suffrage and the right to hold office
- 1921 New marital law guarantees equality for spouses
- 1922 The first woman elected to the Icelandic Parliament, from a women's list
- 1926 The first Icelandic woman defends a doctoral thesis
- 1957 The first female mayor in an Icelandic municipality
- 1961 Equal Pay Act
- 1970 First female Cabinet Minister
- 1975 Women nationwide take a day off on October 24
- 1976 The first Gender Equality Act and the Gender Equality Council is founded
- 1980 The first nationally elected female president in the world
- 1982 The Women's Alliance runs for the first time in local elections
- 1983 The Women's Alliance runs in parliamentary elections for the first time
- 1995 Equal rights of women and men stated in the constitution
- 1997 Fathers get an independent right to two weeks paid parental leave
- 2003 Fathers get an independent right to three months of paid parental leave
- 2005 Women take part of October 24 off on the 30th anniversary of the original event





### Gender equality act

The current legislation on gender equality is the *Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men no. 96/2000*. 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 the society. All individuals shall have equal opportunities to benefit from their own enterprise and to develop their skills irrespective of gender.

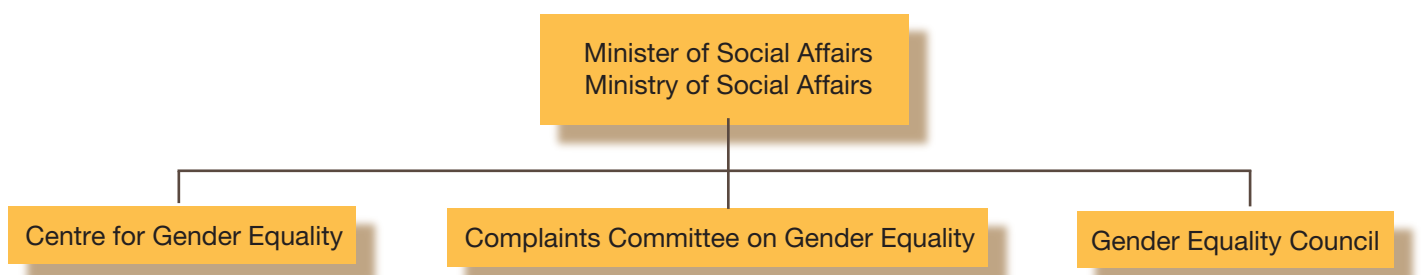
This aim shall be reached by:

- Gender mainstreaming in all spheres of the society
- Working towards equal influence of women and men in decision-making and policy-making in the society
- Enabling both women and men to reconcile their occupational and family obligations
- Improving the status of women and increasing their opportunities
- Increasing education in matters of equality
- Analyzing statistics according to gender
- Increasing research in gender studies

### The organisation of gender equality work in Iceland

The Minister of Social Affairs is in charge of the implementation of the gender equality legislation, but the Centre for Gender Equality is responsible for its administration. The Minister of Social Affairs also appoints a Gender Equality Council and a Complaints Committee on Gender Equality. Within the Ministry of Social Affairs, a special department is in charge of Gender Equality and Employment Affairs.

The Centre for Gender Equality, the Gender Equality Council and the Complaints Committee operate independently of each other. The Centre for Gender Equality provides counselling and education in the field of gender equality. The centre also helps, when needed, with preparing complaints for the Complaints Committee and with the follow up of cases after the Complaints Committee has issued its opinion. The role of the Complaints Committee is to consider and issue a written opinion on whether the provisions of the law have been violated. The Equal Status Council's role is to make systematic efforts to equalize the status and the right of women and men in the labour market.



### **Employment and fertility rates**

Iceland has the highest rate of women's participation in the labour market among the OECD countries, or 76%. Women are 47% of the Icelandic labour force. On average, women work 36 hours a week and men work 48 hours. Unemployment has been very low and was less than 2% in 2006. In spite of this active participation in the workforce and relatively long working hours, Iceland has one of the highest fertility rates in Europe, or 2.1 children per woman. Women started entering the job market at an increased rate in the 1970s. This development has been met with childcare for pre-school children, a legal right for parents to return to their jobs after childbirth and a generous parental leave system.

### **Parental leave**

In the year 2000 the law regulating parental leave changed dramatically. Now Icelanders have a parental leave scheme that is unique. The total leave period is nine months long. Each parent has three months leave which is non-transferable and in addition the parents can divide three months as they like. During their leave parents who have been working full time receive 80% of their former salary. Fathers have grasped this opportunity with enthusiasm and around 90% use their paternal leave. The average number of days used by fathers in 2004 was 96 days, while women used 182 days.

### **Gender pay gap**

Women have 62% of men's employment income, according to tax returns. There are social and cultural reasons for this income disparity between the sexes, but in Iceland variables such as age, education, hours worked and years of work experience are all included when the gender wage gap is calculated. According to one such study from 2006 women have 77% of men's regular income, but when all the variables have been taken into consideration the pay gap is 15.7%. (Capacent study, 2006.)

### **Politics: Parliament**

From 1915, when women gained national suffrage and the right to hold national office, 58 women have been elected to Parliament or 9% of all elected MPs. In the last three decades, the number of women in Parliament has steadily increased. After the parliamentary election in 1979, women were only 5% of the Parliament. The Women's Alliance ran in three voting districts in 1983 and got three women elected, bringing the percentage of women in Parliament up to 15%. Women occupied one fourth of all parliamentary seats in 1995, and in 1999 they were 35% of all MPs. In 2003, female MPs were 30% of Parliament, but during the present term their number increased to 37%. The first female cabinet minister was appointed in 1970. Today women hold four seats of 12 in the Government, or 33%.

### **Politics: Local government**

Women gained local suffrage and the right to hold local office in 1908. The same year, four women were elected to the city council in Reykjavik. In 1958 women were only 1% of all council members in Iceland. A women's list participated in the municipal elections in Reykjavik and Akureyri in 1982, and women's participation went from 4% to 13% of all council members in the country. In 1994 women held a quarter of all council seats and in 2002 they held a third. After the elections in 2006 women are 36% of all council members.

### **Violence against women and children**

Feminist groups in Iceland increased the public's awareness of domestic and sexual violence in the 1980s. The first and only women's shelter was opened in Reykjavík in 1982, and in 1990 a centre for the survivors of sexual violence opened. The Icelandic Government has unveiled an action plan against domestic and sexual violence, which encompasses the years 2006 through 2011. The main goal of this plan is to combat domestic and sexual violence against women and children. It is also meant to provide treatment and support for those who have been the victims of violence and those who are at risk to become victims, as well as treatment for the perpetrators of violence.

### **The first nationally elected female President**

The fourth President of the Republic of Iceland was Vigdís Finnbogadóttir. She was elected in 1980 and stepped down in 1996 after four terms in office. Vigdís was the first woman in the world to be democratically elected Head of State. She is an important role model for Icelanders of all ages and remains active in public life and in the international community.

### **Women's Day Off**

On October 24, 1975, a large part of the women in Iceland took a day off to emphasize the importance of women's contribution, both in paid and unpaid work. Around 25 thousand women gathered in downtown Reykjavík, and many women also met in other parts of the country. On October 24, 2005, Icelandic women left work at 14:08, which was the estimated time when women had earned their pay – based on women's pay as a percentage of men's pay. Close to 50 thousand people went to a rally in downtown Reykjavík, mostly women, which is around one third of all Icelandic women. This is the largest meeting in Icelandic history to date.

### **The Women's Alliance**

The Women's Alliance, Kvinnalístinn, was founded in 1983. Its main objectives were women's liberation and the increased representation of women in politics. When the Women's Alliance began, women were only 5% of MPs, but after the first election that the party participated in this number rose to 15%. In 1999 the 16 year history of the original movement ended when the Women's Alliance became a part of another political party, the Alliance (Samfylkingin).

### **Interesting Links**

The Centre for Gender Equality  
<http://www.gender.is>

Ministry of Social Affairs  
<http://eng.felagsmalaraduneyti.is>

Official co-operation in the Nordic region  
<http://www.norden.org/gender>

RIKK, The Centre for Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Iceland  
<http://www.rikk.hi.is>

NIKK, Nordic Institute for Women's Studies and Gender Research  
<http://www.nikk.uio.no>

### **European projects**

The Centre for Gender Equality participates in various European projects, dealing with issues as diverse as parental and paternity leave, media stereotypes and measuring equality.

Culture, Custom and Caring – Men's and Women's Possibilities to Parental Leave <http://caring.jafnretti.is>

Focus: Fostering Caring Masculinities  
<http://www.caringmasculinities.org>

Modern Men in Enlarged Europe I and II  
<http://www.dadcomehome.org/en/>

Sports, Media and Stereotypes  
<http://www.jafnretti.is/SMS>

Tea for Two: Illustrating Equality  
<http://www.tft.gender.is>



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