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.

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 Reykjavik, 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 Reykjavik, mostly women, which is around one third of all Icelandic women. This is the largest meeting in Icelandic history to date.

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.

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


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

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