

Chapter 9

Gender and Leadership in Iceland: The Journey to the Top of the Global Gender Gap Index



... I think there is something that is very distinct about Iceland which makes the society flat in general ... there is no Mr. and Mrs.
Anonymous interviewee

Abstract The fact that Iceland has been acknowledged at the top of the Global Gender Gap Index for 7 consecutive years has raised interest not only among scholars and practitioners but also the media. A range of documentaries has been produced, and international periodicals such as the Guardian, Al Jazeera, Reuters, BBC, Washington Post, and others have covered the story on why this is the case. In this chapter, Icelandic society's impressive journey to the top of the Global Gender Gap Index is described.

Keywords Global Gender Gap Index · Gender equality · Iceland

9.1 The Bigger Picture

The Global Gender Gap Index was first introduced by the World Economic Forum in 2006 as a framework for capturing the magnitude of gender-based disparities and tracking progress toward rectifying them over time. The Index benchmarks national gender gaps on economic, education, health, and political criteria and assigns country rankings that allow for effective comparisons across regions and income groups. These rankings are designed to create global awareness of the challenges posed by gender gaps and the opportunities created by reducing them. The methodology and quantitative analysis behind the rankings are intended to serve as a basis for designing effective measures for reducing gender gaps (World Economic Forum 2017). The Global Gender Gap Index examines the gap between men and women in four categories: *economic participation and opportunity*, *educational attainment*, *health and survival*, and *political empowerment*.

Economic Participation and Opportunity

This category is based on three concepts: the participation gap, the remuneration gap, and the advancement gap. The participation gap is captured using the difference between women and men in labor force participation rates. The remuneration gap is captured through a ratio of estimated female-to-male earned income and a qualitative indicator gathered through the World Economic Forum's Executive Opinion Survey based on wage equality for similar work. Finally, the gap between the advancement of women and men is captured through the ratio of women to men among legislators, senior officials, and managers, as well as the ratio of women to men among technical and professional workers (World Economic Forum 2017).

Educational Attainment

This category focuses on the gap between women's and men's current access to education through ratios of women to men in primary-, secondary-, and tertiary-level education (World Economic Forum 2017).

Health and Survival

This category provides an overview of the differences between women's and men's health through the use of two indicators. The first is the sex ratio at birth, which aims specifically to capture the phenomenon of "missing women" prevalent in many countries where there is a strong preference to have sons over daughters. The indicator examines the differences between women's and men's life expectancy.

Political Empowerment

This index measures the gap between men and women at the highest level of political decision-making through the ratio of women to men in minister-level and parliamentary positions. Also, it includes the ratio of women to men regarding years in executive office (prime minister or president) for the last 50 years (World Economic Forum 2017).

It is evident that being placed at the top of the Global Gender Index for such a small society with relatively young traditions in human resource relationship management and leadership is a great accomplishment. It demonstrates how a general society's values of egalitarianism have translated into the work environment.

9.2 The Icelandic Case

Iceland has been on the top of the Gender Gap Index since 2009. Iceland has the highest labor force participation within the OECD countries. In 2016, participation rates were 83.4% for women and 89% for men (OECD 2018). In 2017, 199,600 or 81.2% of the population in the age range of 16–74 were active in the labor market, and the unemployment rate was only 2.6% (Statistics Iceland 2018).

The average working hours for the age group 25–74 in the period 2003–2018 was 33.1 for women and 41.2 for men (Statistics Iceland 2018). Thus, Icelanders' full-time work and dual-earning households are the norms which the state and

municipalities support that by providing public access to day-care for children (Snorradóttir et al. 2014).

The incremental progress of gender equality can be attributed to the solidarity of women and human rights defenders challenging and protesting the historic monopoly of power resting in the hands of men. Furthermore, the progress toward gender equality can be attributed to women taking the initiative and creating alternatives to the patriarchal culture that was predominant. Also, making the invisible realities of women visible, most importantly discriminatory practices including sexual harassment and abuse were a critical driving force. Lastly, Iceland's progress can be attributed to women and men sharing decision-making power with each other and gradually having more men supporting gender equality (Marinósdóttir and Erlingsdóttir 2017). When the history of gender equality in Iceland is analyzed, it not only reflects a long journey through which many women struggled for an equal voice and treatment but one that has made considerable progress through female as well as male advocates.

9.2.1 The History of Gender Equality in Iceland

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Iceland were marked by a multitude of social, political, and economic changes. The historical perspective of women's movement and developments is presented below, and based on information from Jafnréttisstofa or the Centre for Gender Equality, which is a national bureau (2012). As can be seen from the history of gender equality on the political front, the solidarity of women through political movement has been crucial in promoting gender equality in Iceland.

Before the middle of the eighteenth century, women in Iceland as elsewhere had very limited formal power. In 1850, the first step was taken as women acquired the same inheritance rights as men. In 1869 the first women's association was founded, and advancements took place in the legal system giving the limited right to widows and unmarried women to vote in 1882. In 1886 girls earned the right to education at the single college in Iceland. This period was marked by developments in Icelandic society that led to an increased profile and mobility of women: a women's college was founded (1874), and the first women's rights organization was founded (1894), as well as the Icelandic Women's Association, i.e., an organization with principle goal of fighting for women's rights, including women's suffrage. These were initial steps that allowed for future developments and laid the ground for the future success of Iceland in gender equality issues.

The first few decades of the twentieth century were marked with many critical social and political changes. Icelandic married women gained their financial competency at the beginning of the new century. In 1902 women with voting right gained local suffrage and in 1908 gained the right to hold local office, which resulted in four women being elected to the city council in Reykjavik the same year. This was a great victory for the founders of the women's suffrage movement in Iceland. 1909

was crowned with all Icelandic women gaining the right to vote and run for office in local elections. In 1907 the Women's Rights Association of Iceland was founded, and Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir is one of the leaders of the women's rights movement in Iceland, but she had worked with the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA). In 1911, women acquired full equal access to education, public grants, and public office. These times paved the way for women's increased access to political office. During this period, women's group's contribution and influence on social issues continued to grow. In 1922, the first woman, Ingibjörg H. Bjarnason, was elected to parliament. In 1948, a male Parliamentarian, Hannibal Valdimarsson, drafted a law on the gender equality of women and men; ironically, this proposal was thrown out based on the assumption that actual discrimination had not been thoroughly researched or demonstrated to exist. Despite that women comprised only 1% of all council members in Iceland in 1958, first women mayors were elected in 1957 and 1959 in Kópavogur municipality closed to Reykjavík and Reykjavík, respectively. In order to address the gender pay gap, in 1961, parliament approved the first law on wage equality with the ultimate aim to bridge the gap by 1968. This, however, has taken longer than anticipated.

The first Icelandic female cabinet minister was appointed in 1970. While full gender equality was still not achieved, these were monumental achievements. "Red Stockings" movement was established the same year, as a reaction to women's right and feminists' movements taking place all over the world. "Red Stockings" movement was a women's liberation movement, which is a critical, radical force raised further awareness on various gender equality issues. Progress toward equality in organized religion was made during this time, as the first woman was ordained as a priest of the National Lutheran Church in 1974. Despite these advances, it was 1975, dubbed UN International Women's Year, when a number of hallmark events occurred. On 24 October 1975, more than 25,000 Icelandic women took a day off, from both paid and unpaid work positions, and went on a strike. They undertook such an action to emphasize the importance of women's contributions to the economy. Also, that same year, a law guaranteeing 3 months' maternal leave was approved, a new law more favorable to women, eliminating a restriction on abortion, securing reproductive and maternal health was passed, and the Women's History Archives was founded. The year 1976 was marked by passing the first equality and foundation of the Gender Equality Council. However, after the parliamentary election in 1979, women were still only 5% of the parliamentarians. This fact made women in Iceland ponder what could be done to change the situation.

The 1980s were characterized by continuous velocity and substantial changes in gender equality issues. Vigdís Finnbogadóttir was elected the fourth President of the Republic of Iceland in 1980. This marked a new era as Vigdís Finnbogadóttir was not only the first woman to be democratically elected as head of state for Iceland but of the entire world. Vigdís Finnbogadóttir had served as the Artistic Director of the Reykjavík Theatre Company from 1972 to 1980, later the City Theatre. She was also a member of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Affairs in the Nordic countries where she served as chair from 1978 to 1980. She had previously taught French at the University of Iceland and hosted French courses at the national television; she

first became nationally recognized as such. In this period Vigdís Finnbogadóttir had been steadily increasing her scope of leadership and visibility by taking on these roles. Vigdís Finnbogadóttir as a female candidate obtained considerable support from women in 1980, particularly women's rights activists. Vigdís Finnbogadóttir was narrowly elected over three male opponents and served as the fourth President of Iceland from 1980 to 1996 (Snaebjornsson 2016). She became very popular as was reflected in the fact that Vigdís Finnbogadóttir remains the longest-serving elected female head of state of any country to date. Vigdís Finnbogadóttir was at the time, she was elected, divorced and was the first single woman in Iceland who was allowed to adopt a child. While she served as president, she was an advocate for girl's education, language diversity, and women's rights as well. She is still regarded as a cherished leader and a role model both in Iceland and internationally.

The year 1980 was a watershed year as not only was Vigdís Finnbogadóttir elected but a political party called *Kvennalistinn* or the Women's Alliance participated in the municipal elections in Reykjavík and Akureyri, a town in the north. Women's participation increased from 6 to 13% among all council members in the country in 1982. The Women's Alliance (*Kvennalistinn*) was founded in 1983 with the main purpose to increase women's liberation and representation of women in the political arena. During the inception of *Kvennalistinn* women accounted for only 5% of members of parliament, but after the taking part in the first election, the number advanced to 15%. Female enrollment in universities also steadily rose during this decade, and by 1984, women had become the majority of new students at the University of Iceland. Other notable achievements of women's advancement occurred in 1986 when the first woman became a member of the Superior Court, Iceland's highest court, for the first time, and in 1988 when a woman became the first Speaker of parliament. In 1999 after relentless work from inside parliament and influence made on the political debate agenda of the traditional political parties, the Women's Alliance ceased to exist (Marínósdóttir and Erlingsdóttir 2017).

During the 1990s progress continued on various fronts and political activities continued. From 1994 to 2002 council seats held by women increased from a quarter to a third. Furthermore, in 1995 women occupied one-fourth of all parliamentary seats, and in 1999 they accounted for 35% of all members of parliament.

Despite the substantial and historical advancements that had been made during the previous decades, public support for gender equality issues began to stagnate. As a response in 2003, the Feminist Association of Iceland was founded and organized numerous initiatives raising public awareness on various gender issues and keeping it at the forefront. In 2003, Icelandic fathers gained the right to nontransferable 3 months' paternal leave; this excluded mothers that had the right for 6 months' maternity leave to take the father's months as leave. During this decade many more women became pioneers and leaders in their respective sectors. On 24 October 2005, to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the women's strike or the women's day off, close to 50,000 women rallied in Reykjavík and in various towns around Iceland. In 2009, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir was the first woman in Icelandic history to become prime minister, and at the time there was an equal number of women and men cabinet ministers.

The largest network of women in Iceland, the Association of Women Business Leaders, *Félag Kvenna í Atvinnulífinu* (FKA) was established in 1999. Initially, it was only for female business owners with the intent to promote and prepare them for promotions and entry into leadership positions in companies. Today this network has broadened its membership to include other professional women's network (Association of Women Business Leaders in Iceland (FKA) 2018). Other professional networks with similar goals have been established both for business leaders and professional networks of women that work in the same industry. Among other gender-related issues, these networks of women were particularly active in pushing for more women representatives on corporate boards.

As a result of FKA's and other agencies' efforts, Iceland passed a law on gender-based quotas for corporate boards in 2010. Women and managers felt the need to increase the number of women in economic decision-making. Norway had introduced gender quotas, and many were keen on taking up similar legislation in the country. Building upon but extending beyond the Norwegian "role model" regarding board composition, this law stated that 40% of each gender must be represented on corporate boards of directors in all state-owned enterprises, publicly traded firms, and private limited companies with 50 or more employees. No other country has legalized such extensive requirements for firms (Arnardóttir and Sigurjonsson 2017). In the year, women made up 20% of all managers on the labor market and 24% of all corporate board members (Snorradóttir et al. 2014). There was some skepticism toward gender quotas, especially among male managers (Rafnsdóttir and Þorvaldsdóttir 2012). The main argument for implementing the law on quota was that, although progress had been made in terms of women representation, women's numbers were still relatively lacking and thus the economy, overall, was not adequately represented by the women. There has been a positive relation between corporate board size and the representation of women on them (Snorrason 2012) since the adoption of the legislation, which seems to point to beneficial changes on several fronts. The Icelandic experience of implementing the gender quota has revealed that mandatory regulation is a likely an important key to the successful increase of female representation around the board table (Arnardóttir and Sigurjonsson 2017). In 2016, women accounted for 48% of elected representatives in parliament (since recent elections it has dropped to 38%). After more than 100 years and the hard work and dedication of women pioneers and their supporters, there is almost political equality in Iceland today (Fig. 9.1).

Just before the allegations against Harvey Weinstein in the United States came to light, the Government of Iceland had been shaken to its core after convicted sex offenders had their "civil standing" restored under legislation from the nineteenth century through the terminology "restoration of honor." Information regarding the cases, withheld initially and later released, constituted a breach of trust in the minds of one of the smaller coalition partners in the government, resulting in the dissolution of the government. In September, the respective clause in the law was repealed (Marínósdóttir and Erlingsdóttir 2017). For the moment, it is evident that the social media is creating a wave of protest where women are speaking out, repeating "#metoo," which created much attention in Iceland as elsewhere.

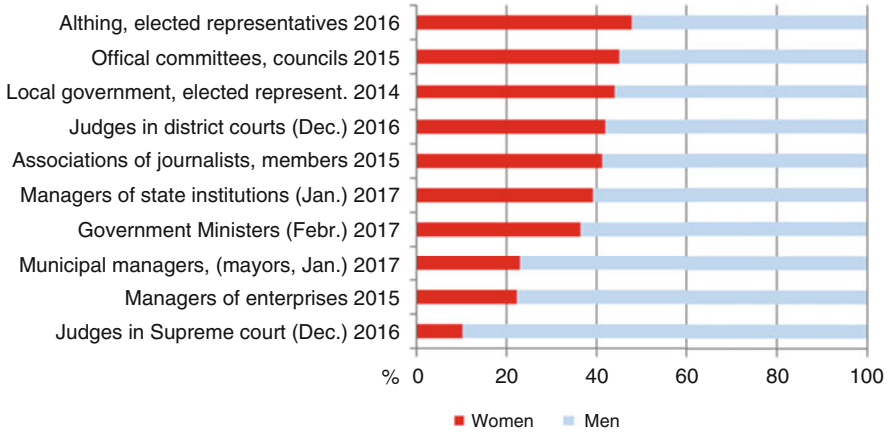


Fig. 9.1 The gender representation in leadership positions. Statistics Iceland (2017)

As gender disparities had existed for decades, Iceland has moved to address this specific issue by introducing laws on equal pay certification. This legislation is based on a tool called the Equal Pay Standard, which aims to eliminate the adjusted gender pay gap. The intention of the government to implement the Equal Pay Standard through legislation was widely debated in Iceland, but it has brought the gender equality debate into mainstream politics and policy-making, away from the margins where it often resides (Marínósdóttir and Erlingsdóttir 2017). Specifically, the standard will apply to all companies and institutions with at least 25 full-time staff positions. Implementing the standard will empower and enable employers to indeed implement a management system of equal pay according to the principle of equal pay for equal work and work of equal value. They will thereby comply with the act on the equal status of men and women and fulfill the demands of international treaties, such as the International Labor Organization Conventions, the Beijing Platform of Action, and the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

9.3 Concluding Remarks

As was stated at the beginning of the chapter, the Global Gender Gap Index examines the gap between men and women in four categories: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. As can be seen in the case of Iceland, it has been a long road filled with challenges and tremendous effort to be able to earn and keep its seat at the top of the Index. The stepping stones have been both big and small. The hallmark event of October 1975 showed women in Iceland what solidarity could bring about when

over 25,000 of them went on strike and almost caused the wheels of society to come to a halt. This led to the Women's Alliance and eventually to the election of Vigdís Finnbogadóttir as the first female President to be elected. The last decades of the twentieth century women's focus turned to the pay gap and access to power in general. Since the turn of the new millennium, further discussion and push for legislative changes have led to major changes regarding women representation on executive boards and equal pay. These initiatives, as well as the current #metoo movement, are signs of progress that can be attributed to earlier efforts in the previous decades. Gender equality is still an important point of discussion and certainly merits and requires continued attention. However, Iceland's top position at the Global Gender Gap Index demonstrates that even in the context of young organizational traditions, with great effort, gender equality can be attained.

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