

Gender Equality in Arctic: Current Realities, Future Challenges

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Madame President, Tarja Halonen,
Mayor of Akureyri,
Rector of the University of Akureyri,
distinguished guests,
ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this international conference on Gender Equality in the Arctic. Akureyri is the capital of Northern Iceland and a thriving center for Arctic research and education – hosting the University of Akureyri, a partner in the University of the Arctic and host of the secretariat for the Northern Research Forum.

The Stefansson Arctic Institute is also located here, and two Arctic Council Working Groups secretariats, PAME and CAFF, the Icelandic Arctic Cooperation Network, as well as private entities such as the Arctic Portal and Arctic Services – all contributing to a strong knowledge base in Arctic science and information.

Ladies and gentlemen

Gender equality is an important policy priority for the Government, both domestically and in our foreign policy. For the past six years, Iceland has been at the top of the Global Gender Gap Index of the World Economic Forum, meaning that it is the country with the narrowest gender gap in the world.

We are proud of progress made in advancing gender equality. Nevertheless, we are fully aware of the numerous challenges that we still need to address in our country.

Only a week ago I was a guest at the Government's Equality Action Fund's conference, where new ambitious research projects were awarded grants and conclusions from previously funded projects were presented. Among the completed projects was a study on how Iceland stands with regard to equal pay for equal work. The conclusions of the research indicate 8,4 % unexplained difference between men and women. We obviously need to make an effort to close the gender wage gap.

Internationally, we remain committed to advocating actively for gender equality, including in the deliberations for a new development agenda to be adopted in 2015. Next year, we will also celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

Twenty years on, the Beijing Platform for Action remains an important framework for advancing gender equality. Countries must use this occasion to strengthen implementation of the commitments they made in Beijing in September 1995. In this context, we find it particularly important to engage men and boys in the discourse on how to achieve gender equality – in a positive and constructive way.

At the United Nations, Iceland and Suriname have partnered to lead a friends' group of countries to galvanize support for gender equality and to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

Together, Iceland and Suriname will convene what we call a "Barbershop" conference at UN headquarters in New York in January 2015. The aim is to mobilize men and boys into a pro-active commitment to gender equality in order to change the discourse among men and boys.

The conference will enlist men leaders as agents and stakeholders, who through their own actions and engagement can work toward the positive transformation of social norms, attitudes and gender stereotypes. A special focus will be on violence against women and how men can join forces to end it.

This initiative has already received considerable attention. To be honest, responses have been both positive and negative. Allow me, therefore, to use this opportunity to make clear that the idea is not in any way to exclude women from the discussion. We are simply trying to stress the importance of bringing men and boys to the table as well, in order to achieve our common goal of a world without gender discrimination.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Nordic Council of Ministers, where Iceland currently holds the presidency, is one example how we have tried to strengthen our international engagement on gender equality. The Nordic countries have been in the forefront in this field, with each country benefiting from the experience of others.

In our presidency program, named *Vigour* and *vitality*, the spotlight is on equal rights and equal status in the labor market, the gender-segregated labor market and ways to combine family life and work.

The Arctic Council has admittedly been less focused on gender equality.

Although several chairmanships have highlighted gender equality issues, they have not featured prominently in the work of the Arctic Council during the past decade. At the same time, Arctic States have promoted gender equality and women's empowerment in other international fora, such as in the United Nations.

But even though the focus on gender issues has been sporadic in the Arctic Council, efforts have been made to increase our knowledge and understanding of the gender perspective in the Arctic context with research, conferences and discussions.

Let me mention a few examples.

In August 2002, Finland in cooperation with the Arctic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers, organized a conference on gender equality and women in the Arctic entitled *Taking Wing*. The Conference, focused mainly on the three broad themes: women and work, gender and the self-determination of indigenous people, and violence against women.

At the Third Ministerial meeting of the Council in Finland, the recommendations of the conference were noted and the Ministers explicitly encouraged the integration of gender equality and women and youth perspectives in all efforts to enhance living conditions in the Arctic.

Furthermore, they recognized the crucial role of women in developing viable Arctic communities.

At the same meeting Iceland took over the Chairmanship from Finland. The Icelandic chairmanship put strong emphasis on enhancing the human dimension within the work of the Arctic Council.

The first Arctic Human Development Report was the main project of the coming two years chairmanship. When presented in 2004 at the Arctic Council Ministerial meeting in Reykjavik, the report was to become the most comprehensive assessment on human condition in the Arctic.

The meeting recommended that it be used as the Arctic Council's knowledge base for its sustainable development program and serve to direct relevant working groups of the Council to consider follow up actions.

The Report included an important chapter on gender issues, addressing many critical matters, such as men's changing roles in society, women's security and violence against them, job opportunities as well as issues of power and control.

Now bringing us closer in time. Later this fall, the second Arctic Human Development Report, will be published, ten years after the first edition.

In the new report gender issues are mainstreamed into each chapter, rather than being addressed as a separate subject. The Stefansson Arctic Institute is also leading the work on this second report, with great support from Canada and Greenland. I'm very pleased to note that some of the authors contributing to

both of these reports are here today to share their knowledge and experience. My hope is that recommendations from this edition of the Report will be implemented more effectively than ten years ago resulting in a more systematic integration of gender perspective in the work of the Arctic Council.

Ladies and gentlemen,

One year ago Iceland put forward a proposal at the Arctic Council with the aim to promote extensive, policy-relevant dialogue on gender equality in the Arctic region in the context of current realities, as well as future challenges. Since then we have worked diligently with our partners in the circumpolar region to organize this conference in order to open and strengthen the dialogue as well as to seek suggestions for possible measures and follow-up actions.

When preparing this conference, we have tried to build on earlier work and conferences. During the next couple of days we will address some of the pressing issues already identified, like gender and natural resource management; women's representation, participation and involvement in decision-making processes and security. Other important topics relate to imbalanced sex-ratio which negatively affects the resilience and development of Arctic communities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As you have heard, Iceland has put great effort into advancing public debate and research on gender issues. This subject remains an integral part of our Arctic policy to strengthen social wellbeing and support sustainable human development in the region.

The changes we are witnessing in the Arctic - ecological, social or economic - are affecting both men and women, and sometimes in different ways. But our common goal remains the same – to secure equal opportunities for both men and women to achieve the life they desire and a world without gender discrimination.

I am well aware that one conference can never cover all the factors affecting gender equality and human wellbeing in the Arctic. However, based on the promising program before us, I know that the discussion will go far and wide over the next two days.

I am confident that this Conference will contribute to a strong cooperation network of the various stakeholders researching, teaching and promoting gender equality issues in the Arctic.

We will publish a comprehensive follow-up report from this event, with key conclusions and recommendations and present it at the Arctic Council before its next Ministerial meeting in April in Canada.

Before giving the floor to the real expert and strong advocate for gender equality, Madam President Halonen, I want to thank Finland, Sweden Norway, the Faroe Islands, Aleut International Association, The Nordic Council of Ministers and the Arctic Council for the strong support. And last but not least I thank the Icelandic Center for Gender Equality, the Stefansson Arctic Institute, the Icelandic Arctic Cooperation Network and everyone who have worked very hard with us to organize this conference.

Now I would like to ask you to give President Halonen a warm welcome!

Thank you!