

How to build a paradise for women. A lesson from Iceland

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Iceland is honoured to be a frontrunner in the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report, and as Prime Minister I am frequently asked about Iceland’s progress, and how we got to where we are. However, I am rarely asked where we should head from here and what we could do better.

It should be noted that the Nordic countries occupied four out of five of the index’s top places in 2017. This is not a coincidence. Nordic countries are all welfare states and support for universal social policies is generally high, and such policies are the key ingredient in building societies that work for women.



rank	AVG	SCORE
1. Iceland		0.878
2. Norway		0.830
3. Finland		0.823
4. Rwanda		0.822
5. Sweden		0.816
6. Nicaragua		0.814
7. Slovenia		0.805
8. Ireland		0.794
9. New Zealand		0.791
10. Philippines		0.790

Source: Global Gender Gap Report 2017, World Economic Forum
 Note: *2017 rank out of 144 countries

Women’s solidarity and social change

The women’s movement has been effective and organised across the Nordic countries. In Iceland, women have repeatedly shown extraordinary solidarity through the women’s day off, which in 1975 attracted 90% of women in Iceland who refused to perform work that day. This highlighted all the visible and invisible tasks, paid and unpaid, that women undertake every day, everywhere, and form the foundation of our communities. This day was the beginning of a huge and powerful movement that resulted in an enormous social change in Iceland.

The solidarity that the Icelandic women’s movement built in the 1970s and the 1980s laid the foundation for welfare policies that have liberated women in the country in many ways. My generation was born into an atmosphere of women’s liberation. As children we were surrounded by role models, where women took up more space in society than they had ever done before. Women were marching on the street and the first female president, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, was elected. For us, it meant that we were not forced to choose between having a family or having a career; a choice that women in many countries are faced with, limiting women’s participation in the labour market and their access to decision making.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Katrin Jakobsdottir.

Image: REUTERS/Hannibal Hanschke

Childcare and parental leave

Two public policies are worth mentioning in this context. First, universal high-quality childcare transformed women’s opportunities to participate in the economy and in society at large. As women still carry the bulk of child rearing, childcare costs prevent

women across the world from joining or re-joining the labour market and/or participating in politics.

Second, well-funded shared parental leave – with a use-it-or-lose-it proportion for fathers – addresses the systematic discrimination women have suffered at work, due to the possibility alone that they might have children. If men are as likely to take a break from work to care for children, this structural discrimination diminishes.

Many female politicians in Iceland would never have got where we are today if it wasn't for childcare and parental leave. I am an excellent example of that. And in this sense, governments and parliaments can lead the way by adopting policies that have been shown to bridge the gender gap, rather than widen it.

No country has eliminated violence against women

Yet, despite Iceland's progress, structural inequalities are still persistent in the country. Most recently the #metoo movement exposed systematic harassment, violence and everyday sexism that women at all levels of Icelandic society are subjected to. Moreover, the movement revealed the multiple discriminations suffered by migrant women in a country that has throughout history been relatively ethnically homogenous.

It remains alarming that no country in the world has managed to find ways to eliminate violence against women. Violence against women is both a cause and a consequence of women's inequality.

To this day, the Gender Gap Index does not measure violence against women and neither does any other similar index. To be sure, violence is difficult to measure. Police reports only tell half the story and official and societal definitions of what counts as violence may differ between cultures. Yet, some kind of comparison on rates of violence against women would, without doubt, put further pressure on governments to step up their game to eliminate those persistent human rights violations.

A part of the solution: Women Leaders Global Forum

This year, and for the following three years, the Government and Parliament of Iceland will serve as co-hosts to the Women Leaders Global Forum (WLGf), along with Women Political Leaders (WPL). This unique forum attracts women from politics, businesses, academia and civil society to share ideas and solutions that help build better societies and promote gender equality. It can serve as a platform to explore ways to further reduce gender-based inequalities across the world. Because while there is a significant difference in women's position in various corners of the world, the nature of the discrimination women suffer is similar.

There is still work to be done and we must not relent in the fight for women's equality, even though we reach important milestones. The Gender Gap Index, the 2018 edition of which is launching next month, should serve as an encouragement for all of us to do better. By learning from one another and sharing experiences, I believe that we will move closer towards our goal.

As Prime Minister of Iceland, I am deeply committed to building a world where women are free to reach their full potential, to the benefit of all.

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/11/iceland-paradise-for-women-katr%C3%ADn-jakobsdottir/>