

Ásmundur Einar Daðason, Minister of Social Affairs and Equality, Iceland
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Dear guests,

It is an honour and a genuine pleasure for me to be here with you today and I look forward to sharing our work and experiences on the implementation of policies in the field of gender equality.

The Nordic countries represent one of the most gender-equal labour markets in the world. Moreover, in all the Nordic countries less Finland, the increase in women's employment accounted for about 10-20% of GDP per capita growth over the past 40-50 years. In Finland it was less because the labour market participation of women was already high even as early as the 1970s.

Across Europe, however, women remain considerably underrepresented not only in decision making but also in the labour market where overall employment rate of women is still lower than of men despite higher educational attainment. Women are also more likely than men to take on a part time job because of caring responsibilities at home. The challenge women have in balancing between work and care is confirmed by the findings of a recent poll done by the Thomson Reuters Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation, which found that work-life balance concerns women the most followed by the gender pay gap; harassment in the workplace with about 33% of the women respondent reporting sexual harassment; equal career opportunities; and impact of having children on their careers.

In Iceland, as well as in the other Nordic countries, the conditions for gender equality did not develop by its own accord. The incremental progress can be attributed to the hardworking and resilient women's movement, eventually creating political will for the State and the social partners to invest in a social infrastructure of gender equality which consists of four key pillars the women's movement had been advocating for.

These are universal and affordable day-care; paid and shared parental leave; equal opportunities at work and for increased leadership of Women at all levels; and lastly flexible work arrangements to create conditions for work-life balance. These pillars are combined with universal health care, a strong social protection system and access to education.

Despite being successful we still have space for improvements. In the Nordic Countries like elsewhere, it continues to be more common for women to discontinue their participation in the labour market for a longer period than men while taking parental leave or taking care of seriously ill or dependent relatives. These gendered trends tend to have negative implications for the work carrier and the salary level of women in the long run, resulting in less income and later in lower pension benefits calculated on previous earnings.

The unadjusted gender pay gap varies from about 6% in Denmark to 18% in Finland for full-time employees. The gender pay gap can partly be attributed to the deep-rooted gender segregation in the labour market and a society where traditional women's jobs are still less valued compared to men's jobs. This trend continues despite the high educational attainments among women and that fact is a part of patriarchal structures we share worldwide.

We all know that we must overcome gender-based social norms and gender stereotypes, which are deeply rooted in our societies, to bridge the gender pay-gap and encourage women to participate actively in the labour market. We also know it will take time. In Iceland, for instance, the gender pay gap has continued despite prohibition of gender discrimination in pay by law since 1961 and legal avenues to challenge such alleged discrimination.

One of the key reasons for its continuation has been the difficulty of employees to challenge alleged discrimination in pay because of the burden of prove which is challenged by unclear job description and secrecy around salaries and other remuneration.

Because of the apparent inability or unwillingness to eliminate the gender pay gap, a political will was generated in 2007 to consider ways towards eliminating the gap. Subsequently, an Equal Pay Standard was developed over a period of four years, from 2008 to 2012, in collaboration between the State and the social partners and with technical support of the National Standards body of Iceland. The key element of the standard is the classification of all jobs within a workplace *by the same criteria*, followed by their ranking into jobs of the same or equal value and then linking between the outcomes of the job classification and the salary structure. Subsequently, staff performing the same job or two different jobs, ranked equal in value, will get the same salary.

After being developed, the standard was tested by several public and private entities. The pilot of the standard often revealed gender discrimination in pay and various trends that employers were not aware or conscious of until after applying the standard. Many, who considered themselves to be fair employers, were taken by surprise. The implications of the use of the standard for the employees was more trust in the senior management and better workplace morale as staff knew that they were treated equally.

The use of the Equal Pay Standard was voluntary until 1st of January this year when Equal Pay Certification on its basis became mandatory by law. The law was voted in favour of a large majority, not least because it was based on a negotiated consensus between the State and the social partners. In practice, this means that the Icelandic government is taking an affirmative action to eliminate the gender pay gap by 2022 as the law makes the use of the Equal Pay Standard mandatory for all workplaces in Iceland with 25 staff or more on annual basis. As such, the new law constitutes a *tool* to help us to fulfil decades old obligations – rising from our own legislation from 1961 prohibiting gender discrimination in pay and international obligations on equal pay for work of equal value such as the ILO convention nr.100 in 1951 that most member states of the UN have signed.

In conclusion, getting to the question posed to me by the organisers of the conference asking if compulsion and regulation are required to bring about significant social change or if there is another way **my answer would be yes, it is required**. Number of legislative and special measures have helped us make progress; it is not just a coincidence. Legislation can be a very effective tool in subverting traditional roles in society and that it is increasingly understood that both men and women can perform well in roles and tasks that traditionally have belonged to the other gender.

Besides gender equality legislation, we also use tools such as gender mainstreaming and budgeting – and at time resorting to special measures like quotas on company boards with 50 staff or more with the aim to speed up progress in certain areas. Such measures have often been met with some resistance, only to be proven successful and sometimes even popular for all involved.

The best case in point is the individual and none-transferable paternity leave that grants men the exclusive right to take three months of parental leave within the first two years of the child. Increased engagement of fathers as caregivers has in turn brought normative changes to the notion of masculinities among the population and brought the gender equality debate more and more to mainstream politics and policy making – as opposed on the margins where it often resides.

The result is that Iceland has been the frontrunner on the World Economic Forum 's Global Gender Gap Index for the last nine years. We still have a long way to go and are eager to reach further not only because gender equality is a matter of justice but also because we know it is a matter of necessity in terms of sustaining strong welfare policies and economic prosperity in our country.

At the same time as we are proud world champions of gender equality, we also understand that the title carries with it a lot of responsibility. Thus, we try to be good role models, share lessons learned, collaborate with others and contribute to continuous progress in Iceland as well as worldwide by means of our international engagement and development cooperation.

We also use every opportunity to point out that the gender gap index does not measure sexual violence, harassment or other related issues. It is nonetheless obvious that sexual violence and gender-based harassment is a global phenomenon that thrives in the shadows of patriarchy, across nations, nationalities, ethnicity, class and status – Also in Iceland.

The sovereignty of women's bodies is being challenged around the world as the #MeToo movement has demonstrated. Since it gained traction last year millions of women have used the hashtag on social media across the world. Anonymously or not, women have revealed epidemic levels of harassment, violence and everyday sexism.

In some countries the impact of #metoo has been minimal while in others the movement has led to a robust review of structural inequalities, within specific sectors or in society at large. The impact of #metoo has been significantly different amongst the Nordic countries, which normally rank high on gender equality indexes. The whole Icelandic society was shaken by the #metoo revolution. Events, dialogue, media and the reactions of Icelandic authorities reflect this. Only a few days after the first #metoo confessions appeared the Government presented various actions, work groups and a Ministerial committee on equal rights was formed and actions were taken by the women movement and many men and boys joined forces with them.

Around 15 groups of women stepped forth with stories and appeals and more than 5.500 women signed a petition, protesting violence and calling for changes.

#MeToo women in Iceland decided that naming and shaming the offenders should not be a priority – even though some women choose to step forth and give back the shame to their perpetrators. The movements more general focus has been on criticizing and tackling a deep cultural structure and negative masculine culture that have fostered and tolerated violent behavior for centuries and makes it more difficult for women than men to succeed and to participate equally in positions of power. Power means many things in the world of #MeToo – it certainly means empowering women to tell their stories openly and fearlessly. But it should also signify *our power* to challenge and change the structures of society rather than changing women. I hope that last year will be remembered as a milestone in our common struggle for Gender Equality and against the sexual violence that is an everyday reality of too many women.

My Government puts gender equality as a high political priority on the its agenda. Next Iceland holds the presidency in the Nordic Council of Ministers and will host a large international conference on #MeToo and its impact on women's equality in the Nordic countries and beyond and ask how governments, businesses and organisations have, and should, respond. We would be very pleased to welcome all you to the conference which is taking place in September next year.

Enough from me, I'm very pleased to be with you for I what I hope will be a very good discussion on this very important topic for the benefit of both women and men, girls and boys.

Thank you for your attention.