

## **Gender equality – a top Government Priority – Hellisheiði 31. okt 2019**

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be speaking on a topic close to my heart, gender equality.

I have been working in this field, both directly and indirectly for decades. As a former local politician, Mayor and a member of parliament I have been in the position to make strategic and extensive decisions for the advancement of gender equality. In 2011 I started a career as a government official and have worked in various ministries.

In February this year I was appointed Director General of a new Department of Equality in the Prime Minister's Office as the policy field of equality was added to the portfolio of the Prime Minister. By doing so the government aims to further strengthen its commitments and to advance gender mainstreaming of policies and decision making in all Line Ministries and State Institutions. The decision was based on the government agreement, which defines gender equality as a high political priority and the Prime Minister has in recent months increased political leadership in the field.

In 2018, Iceland was for the tenth year in a row ranked as a frontrunner in Global Gender Gap Index of the World Economic Forum. We are excited to observe the successes of other nations and are hoping for intense competition among countries in the top seats. I am convinced that the Icelandic experience can be of value for others as the root causes of discrimination and equality are universal in nature. Therefore, the solutions to end discrimination in one country can be replicated in another.

Our strength here in Iceland lies in political power, education and access to health services – Our weakness is the gender segregated labor market, both the persisting gender pay gap and women's lack of sustainable political and economic power.

In my presentation today, I will focus on two main issues, the legislation and a new governmental Gender Equality Action Plan for the next four years. Certainly, there are several other matters that are important such as the struggle against violence and sexual harassment against women but that would be a subject of another review.

*We have come a long way since* the first comprehensive legislation on equal rights and equal status of women and men was adopted in 1976 but there are numerous challenges that still need to be addressed, such as closing the gender pay gap, securing equal political and economic power between women and men, and eliminating gender-based violence.

In the Act from 1976 government policy on gender equality was formulated and a special Gender Equality Council established to enforce the legislation. The legislation has been amended by law in 1985, 1991, 2000, and 2008, and is currently under revision to both build on the progress made and to meet both prevailing and new challenges to the status of the genders in our society.

In recent decades it has been high on the political agenda to tackle gender-based wage discrimination

The latest gender equality flagship in Iceland is the Law on the Equal Pay Certification. The legislation – entered into force in the beginning of 2018 – made certification of equal pay systems of companies and institutions with 25 employees or more mandatory. Equal Pay Systems shall, according to the law, be based on the implementation of an Icelandic management requirement standard on equal pay. . The purpose is to enforce the current legislation prohibiting discriminatory practices based on gender and enforcing the decade old principle of equal pay for work of equal value for men and women working for the same employer.

**The certification** is a comprehensive process that helps employers analyse their pay structures, identify potential discrimination and correct it.

As such, **this new legislative tool transfers the responsibility of equal pay from the individual employee over to the employer.** It is the obligation of the employer to ensure, by means of a certification, that there is no wage discrimination within their company or institution.

For now, the equal pay standard works within each organizational unit but not across the labour market. Closing the pay gap in a labour market which is deeply segregated by gender is the biggest challenge in the long run. In a survey, that was made this spring, by the Department of Equality on the implementation of the equal pay certification law, around 81% of the

companies were content about implementing the standard. The sample size was not big but the results still gives the indication that the benefits of the Standard are seen to outweigh the costs of implementing it.

**Secondly**, I want to mention a new plan of action for Gender Equality for the period 2020-2023 that specifies the Government's most urgent tasks in the field of gender equality. It aims to address the gap between the objectives of the Gender Equality Act and political aspirations and the reality on the ground by introducing a set of special measures or interventions intended to correct the identified gender equality deficits and securing gender equality in Icelandic society. As such, the Action Plan illustrates the government's emphasis and priorities in the field of gender equality issues at each time. The parliamentary resolution on the plan of action for the years 2020 - 2023 was submitted to the parliament last month. Among projects are measures to integrate gender equality issues into decision-making and policy formulation by the government and gender-responsive budgeting.

The plan outlines 24 measures to be implemented during the four-year period. It is divided into several chapters, each addressing a different thematic area/focus. Each of the 10 ministries is responsible for at least one intervention. Some of the interventions are continuation from the current Action Plan on Gender Equality such as gender mainstreaming while others are new such as special prevention and protection measures in response to the #metoo revelations addressing gender-based and sexual harassment, intimidation and violence in sports, recreation and leisure activities for children, youth and adults.

***Before ending this talk I shortly want to mention*** that Gender Equality does not come about of its own accord. Neither does knowledge and be assured that your academic initiatives, hard work and active participation in the effort to create and strengthen knowledge for your countries, regions and beyond are highly appreciated.

It has taken a lot of dedicated political will and action to turn the tide. The Women's Movement has historically generated both. Their demands have in fact transformed the makeup of our society and contributed greatly to the general wellbeing of all members of society, men and women alike.

I very much look forward to learning more from all of you participating in this important event.

Thank you for your attention

