

Dear guests.

It is a pleasure to see you all here and look forward to spending the next two days with you.

The purpose of this conference is to enable us all to share knowledge and experiences of the tools and technique that have proved useful in seeking and bettering gender equality and hopefully find new ones for new and further conquests.

Gender equality is one of the pillars of Iceland's Foreign Policy. I have to mention that this was decided when a woman with very strong feministic background, Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, served as the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Kristín Árnadóttir, her assistant for many years, also with the same feministic background, is the first appointed Icelandic ambassador of Gender Equality and one of the organizers of this conference. I mention this to remind myself and all of you to use every opportunity to NAME women's achievements and remember their history, which has through the centuries and still is far too often buried and forgotten. Men never forget their achievements, whether it be as great thinkers, scientists, artists or specially for being responsible for the killing of a huge number of people – often in the name of some high and noble purpose. Thankfully not very many women can boast of that. But women should not be weighed down by the famous modesty, which according to holy scriptures is one of their greatest virtues. Modesty and obedience! No, remember and name!

It does not surprise anyone that Iceland has some knowledge to offer in the field of fishing and fish industry or in the field of geothermal resources. But why gender equality. The simple answer, but not the only one, is that Iceland has caught the attention of the world for topping the World Economic Forum list of gender equality for the last decade. Why has Iceland scored so high on the list. My answer is - because of women's initiative for more than a century. I will just mention a few milestones.

In 1908 women that had founded the Women's Rights Association, which still exist today, decided to present a Women's List in order to run for the election to the Reykjavík Council. They found that there was something lacking on the agenda of the council and put forward issues that they thought should be there. Issues that would improve

the life of women, like health care, education, welfare, children care etc. The Women's List got the highest percentage of votes in Reykjavík and four women were elected to take a seat on the council. They would have got five women elected – but there were only four on the list. Women's modesty! Women's lists ran from 1908 till 1922, to the council and even Parliament. One woman took a place there. Apparently she had a very difficult time there – being the only woman and joined the Conservative Party. She was not reelected.

This same group of women of course with a greater backland fought for the right to vote like women in many other countries. Icelandic women got this right 1915.

Then for complicated historical reasons the struggle for women's rights came to a standstill. The great depression and two great – or shall we say horrible - wars saw to that. When mankind faces serious problems women's rights and issues fall drastically down the list of preferences. There are more important issues at stake! But after the Second World War the wheels started turning again. Slowly at first but gradually with a greater speed. In Iceland women flooded into schools and universities and onto the working market.

In the sixties The Red Stockings Movement was founded and it's achievements were groundbreaking. Of course too radical for many and the reaction of the patriarchy in Iceland was not one of tolerance or understanding. They ridiculed the Red Stockings of course. They were ugly, bitter, angry, unable to attract men etc. – we all know this mantra! But The Red Stocking Movement opened up endless new ideas and possibilities and dramatically changed for many women their self evaluation and society.

One of their greatest task, together with the Women's Workers Union, was the project „the Women's Day Off". This happened on the 24th of October 1975. The same day as the decade that The United Nation had decided should be dedicated to women began. Thousands and thousands of women rushed downtown and gathered in the biggest outdoor meeting ever held in Iceland. After listening to speeches and radical feministic songs they filled every restaurant and cafes in town or wherever they chose to go and participated in heated discussion, happy, hopeful and triumphant. They had brought the society to a standstill with their absence. No business, companies, offices or institutions functioned without women. Let alone the poor

husbands who had to shoulder responsibility for one day! It proved very hard for many of them and it is said that a record was set in selling hot dogs. Easy to prepare. Just heat the water and throw the sausages in.

This action, this great day, might not in itself have brought any great changes to the life of Icelandic women, but it certainly raised their consciousness. They became aware of their importance and intolerable situation.

The next important milestone is when in the year 1980 Vigdís Finnbogadóttir was elected president, the first woman in the world to be elected in a democratic election as head of state. Women were very active in her campaign, which was an unusual and difficult one. She faced a very different approach to the male candidates. Being a single mother and with one breast! She was asked on television weather that wasn't a handicap and her answer captivated every woman. She said she was not going to breastfeed the nation! She got – in spite of her handicaps – elected and the majority of the votes came from women. She became a very important role model for women and little girls grew up with the idea that it was perfectly natural for a woman to become president. Since she resigned we have had male presidents!

In 1982 the Women's Alliance was founded. A group of women thought it was high time for a new radical action. Enough is enough. After lengthy discussions, for months were many women participated, the idea to run for the Council of Reykjavík soon became the main subject. There were certainly different opinions weather this was the right step to take, many left the group and in the end 12 women decided to go along with the idea. They called for a meeting in a hotel downtown proposing this idea and hundreds of women came and it was unanimously agreed to form The Women's Alliance. Incidentally the same idea had come up in Akureyri as well, neither group knowing of the other. Both succeeded and got women elected to the councils.

In 1983 the Women's Alliance, that soon became a landwide movement, ran for Parliament, and had representatives there for the next 16 years. The reaction of the existing political parties was to increase the number of women on their lists and take aboard many ideas from the Women's Alliance. OK. The more the merrier!

The Women's Alliance brought a whole new perspective into the political life and into Parliament. One very important aspect is that they made the personal political. Took up issues like sexual and domestic violence, incest, pornography, and the rights of homosexual people to name a few. Words like rape, sexual violence, incest and homosexuality and others alike had never been uttered in Parliament and certainly stirred up great waves on the still, deep patriarchal water. But of course there were lots of other issues. Maternity leave – also for men – kindergartens, minimum wages, a different method to measure the economic growth, where the exploitation of nature should be taken into account, an emergency center for the victims of sexual violence (which was actually agreed on) just to name a few and of course all the traditional issues like economics, industry, fishing policy etc. I could dwell on this for long but will at last but not the least mention that whatever issue, idea, bill or resolution was being discussed the women always took two aspects into consideration. One – **how will this affect women** and second – **how will this affect nature!** This was 35 years ago!

The milestones I have mentioned had one thing in common – and this is of great importance. The women involved came together and united across all traditional political and ideological lines. Displaying more importance and loyalty to the very important issue of women's rights – abandoning all that heritage and upbringing had taught them – to be loyal to men and support their patriarchal dominion. These women - free from the male dominance, patriarchy and traditional political parties - took action. **I don't hesitate to say that it is the initiative of Icelandic women that has brought Iceland to the top of the World Economic Forum's list.**

So the question arises. Is Iceland a woman's paradise. The answer is definitely no! In spite of enjoying a situation much better than most of the women on this planet, Icelandic women face the same reality as all women wherever they are. Their reality is more work in and outside the home, more responsibility, lesser power and wealth, and less influence, pay gap etc. And the most serious of all is violence, physical and/or mental, domestic and sexual. Even trafficking and prostitution, the most severe and extreme form of how women are objects for men to use and exploit, found it's way to Iceland. The gender equality we have gained is, with it's pros and cons, within the patriarchal system – women have been allowed to join the game – as long as they don't try to change the rules too much. They have

certainly managed to improve it a bit and somewhere even quite a lot – but no fundamental changes. And fundamental changes is what the world needs now. I call upon women to lead these changes.

The lesson to be learned and the tools and technique I would suggest is for women to unite across traditional lines and abandon all preconceived ideas enforced upon them in upbringing, schools, culture and traditions. I don't trust patriarchy to deconstruct their own creation and build a new one. The men that hold power in this world and reign over its accumulated wealth and resources are too intertwined in the current situation – their own creation. The whole system, the ideology, philosophy, economic systems, political systems, religions, culture and science – you name it – all has been created by men and they have reigned over it as long as history recalls. They have sophisticated the systems and methods and thus affirmed their power. That is patriarchy. Not everything is bad and men have brought us much wisdom and we have all enjoyed many of their fruits and will continue to do so. But let us not forget that one of the main pillars of patriarchy and the one that is used to withhold their sovereignty is violence, They violate and kill each other in wars (I have here a list of fought wars over the last two thousands years, that are known and documented, in which 25 thousand people or more have died. I am not reading it – it would take nearly half an hour)- and they violate women, children, animals and very severely they violate nature. And now nature is striking back. Patriarchy, systems, ideology, power or wealth is of no importance to nature. It just strikes and punishes everybody – everywhere, regardless of their nationality, social status or sex!

Nature's revenge cannot be stopped or lessened without new ideology, new systems and new methods. We all know it is not enough to drive electric cars, recycle, fly less etc., we have to adjust to a new lifestyle if the planet is to survive. The planet with all its life and resources, mankind included, need women. Women have a duty to answer this call. I am not suggesting that all women should form Women's Lists or parties. But I am urging them to unite in politics, movements, organizations, working places or wherever they choose to place themselves. Unite across political and ideological lines, break boundaries and free themselves from preconceived ideas. Bring together their experience and wisdom, which women have in abundance.

I now belong to a newly founded small group of women, IceFemIn, Icelandic Feminists Initiative. It's members are women with huge experience of working in politics inside the Parliament and on the field as well. Women who are eager, willing and wanting to share their experience with other women. We would be glad to share our working methods, which were crucial, and ideas with you all, here at the conference or later. Consensus is a key word. It deepens all discussions and therefore the conclusions. Start with ideas that you all agree on, you will always find at least one, and work from there. And most likely new ideas, methods and solutions will appear. Ideas that might surprise everybody. The freedom from preconceived ideas leaves a lot of space for creativity. The playwright Ionesco actually put this in one sentence which I often quote. He said: „There are two sides to every matter- but it is the third one that counts.” I know that a lot of men will be more than willing to support „the third idea”. They are also threatened and longing for solutions.

We are gathered here in this power plant driven by geothermal water. Not far from here there are more geothermal fountains that are utilized to heat the houses in Reykjavík and fountains that supply Reykjavík with cold water. Both the cold and hot fountains are great resources that nature has graciously allowed us to harness and use. As long as we do not exploit them. But remember that these great water supplies consist of drops. Drops that fell on the land as rain or snow, melted and sieved into and through lava and rocks, until it found its way to here, united in these great resources. Women of the world, small drops in ocean of mankind, have sieved through history for centuries, just like this water. United they are fountains, great resources and power. Lets harness them!

Thank you.

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