

Changing Gender Perspectives in Iceland – The Women’s Day Off

A dramatic shift took place on October 24th, 1975, irreversibly changing the perspectives of women in Icelandic society. Prior to this date a discernibly low level of respect was evident for women in domestic and waged positions. Infuriation caused by this disregard for female efforts in the community, led to the united decision of Icelandic women to take action in the form of a strike. Known by locals as, ‘Kvennafri’, the 1975 ‘Women’s Day Off’ was an undeniable success, with ninety percent of the country’s female population refusing to partake in any form of work for the entirety of the day. This symbolic act of social defiance altered the understanding of women’s role in society and was an important turning point that paved the way for many positive changes regarding gender equality in Iceland.

Planning Kvennafri required an immense aggregation of determination and cooperation; however, the outcome was definitively worth all efforts. The event, with widespread support and participation, was exceedingly successful. A feminist organisation known as Redstocking first presented the idea of a strike in 1970, although it was not until 1975 that the suggestion was genuinely deliberated. According to the official Women’s History Archives in Iceland, a committee was formed in the spring of 1975 by representatives of the nation’s five largest female associations in addition to a spokesperson for the United Nations. This committee was tasked with the organisation of a congress for women in Reykjavik - the country’s capital - to be held later that year. When the congress met on the 20th and 21st of June, with over two hundred women of varying age, social status and political opinion in attendance, they discussed matters of concern primarily surrounding gender inequality. Here, a strike was proposed to be held on October 24th, the United Nations day. However, many women displayed apprehension towards such an event - as strikes were illegal at the time - and feared it would cost them their jobs and cause uproar among men. Therefore, the event’s title was swiftly altered to the less severe label of a ‘day off’, gaining public approval and permitting mass participation. An article published in the *Scandinavian Review* by Mia Einarsdottir and Gerdur Steinthorsdottir (1997) claimed that polls conducted in various, Icelandic workplaces revealed “80-100 percent of the employed women were in favour of the action”. BBC reporter Kirstie Brewer (2015) supports this statement in her article titled, *The Day Iceland’s Women Went on Strike*, by claiming 90 percent of Icelandic women abstained from work of any form on that day. Additionally, *Morgunbladid* (1975), an Icelandic newspaper released a similar report on October 25th placing 25,000 women – over one tenth of the country’s total population – in Lækjartorgur, Reykjavik where speeches and celebrations were scheduled to commence throughout the day. Both sources corroborate in describing the day as a monumental occasion and overall success. All efforts payed off; women were finally recognised.

The triumph of the event can be attributed to the arduously low value placed upon women in the Icelandic domestic and waged work forces preceding October 1975. An unmistakable disconnect existed between the copious societal expectations of women regarding domestic work and placement of female employees in waged positions. However, whether receiving an

income or not, women remained evidently unrecognised for their efforts. In her anthropological study, *Women in Iceland*, Doctor Elizabeth Johnson (1984) forces this injustice into attention by stating, “women’s role in contemporary society has tended to be ignored in Iceland itself”. Johnson highlights this ignorance towards the importance of female contribution – paid and unpaid – as a crucial incentive for the 1975 ‘Women’s Day Off’. She argues that the event was not intended to accentuate the privileges of men, but rather increase awareness of women’s social involvement. Corroborating this standpoint, the Executive Committee for ‘Women’s Day Off’ (1975) distributed approximately 47,000 copies of a letter titled *Why a Day Off for Women?* foregoing the event, listing a selection of reasons to encourage participation, including “the difference between the average monthly earnings of women and men labourers is icel. kr. 30.000. – (approx. £100. – or \$200.-), and the work experience of a housewife is not considered of any value on the labour market”. The gender pay gap during this time was a considerable cause for complaint in Iceland. This claim is supported by Johnson (1984) as she explains that a housewife of over a decade would receive the wage of a beginner when undertaking work at a crèche or similar establishment. Furthermore, it is expressed in the same handout that males in positions of power diminished the necessity of childcare facilities primarily run by women. Inequality and blatant sexism permeated the Icelandic wage-labour and domestic work forces. Another point brought forward was the tendency of employers to favour male candidates when advertising for respectable or well-paying jobs. The Executive Committee (1975) stated “whether an applicant for a job is male or female is often considered more important than education or competence”. The handout concluded that, “women’s contribution to the community is underestimated” (Executive Committee for ‘Women’s Day Off’ 1975). and urged women to cease all work on October 24th as a demonstration of their significance when considering the management of daily life. Based upon this primary source it is clear that women’s capabilities were decidedly overlooked at this time. The handout coincided with the United Nations’ declaration naming 1975 as the International Women’s Year.

When the women stopped working, Iceland was quick to follow. By removing a key factor in the functionality of society, considerable consequences began to arise. Many recounts of the day depict the complete paralysis brought upon the country as the women refrained from all aspects of work. In an article of the Guardian titled, *Once more, Iceland has shown it is the best place in the world to be female*, author Sif Sigmarsdóttir lists some of the numerous institutions closed due to lack of staff for the duration of the day. Sigmarsdóttir (2018) states, “Schools and nurseries were closed. Many shops, factories and theatres had to close their doors. Fathers were left with no choice but to bring their kids to work” expressing only a fraction of the widespread disruption caused by the event. Furthermore, in an interview for Michael Moore’s documentary *Where to Invade Next?* former director of the Icelandic Chamber of Commerce, Hella Tómasdóttir (2015) expands, “no banks opened, no kids aid, no buses rode into town; it was impossible to get anything done on that day because when women don’t work, nothing works”. Clearly, the event’s goal of acquiring recognition for the importance of female contribution was reached. Although life seemingly returned to normal shortly after, the day – often referred to as the ‘Long Friday’ by men – did have one abrupt and long-lasting effect. Tómasdóttir accredits the event as changing “the impression of

the value of women for women and men alike forever”. The male population was undoubtedly left to understand and appreciate the extensive gravity of women’s role in society.

In addition to the various immediate effects of *Kvennafri*, many less-direct yet similarly significant impacts were made apparent across the following years in Iceland. Most noticeable are the numerous alterations seen within the nation’s political sector. Foremost, five years after the Day Off took place, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir became the world’s first female head of state to be democratically elected. Many Icelandic children born within the sixteen years Finnbogadóttir served in this role grew to believe there was nothing extraordinary about a woman holding such authority. Sigmarsson (2018) states, “Seeing a woman in a position of power had a profound effect on me and my female contemporaries when we were growing up”, explaining how her and many other young people developed a strong belief that women could accomplish anything, simply because exposure to strong female figures was customary at that time. This effectively meant an entire generation was raised with a mind-set of complete impartiality when considering the expectations of men and women alike. In Sigmarsson’s (2018) article, Finnbogadóttir expressed her strong belief that the 1975 Day Off played a key part in her 1980 election, describing the event as “the first step for women’s emancipation in Iceland” and accrediting its symbolic implications as a major factor in shaping the contemporary representations and perspectives of women in Iceland. Moreover, Iceland has maintained its position as first on the *Global Gender Gap Index* for nine consecutive years – as of 2017 – and recently provided undeniable justification for this highly honourable recognition. Last January, following seven months of careful deliberation, a bill of law was introduced across the nation as a method of confronting the gender pay gap. Continuing the theme of firsts, this bill recognises Iceland as the only state to establish a framework legally requiring companies and institutions to provide evidence for the equal pay of their employees, regardless of gender. The Government Offices of Iceland released an outline of what this bill entails. Namely, certification must be acquired by organisations with twenty-five or more employees to prove that equal wages and equal terms of employment are maintained for workers in positions of corresponding value. Failure to attain this certification will result in fines, creating a clear incentive for companies to uphold their agreement of ensuring gender equality in the work force. In addition to this major step taken by Iceland to create a more egalitarian society, other smaller yet comparably important changes have been made. Kirstie Brewer (2015) reported that in 2010 Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, Iceland’s first female prime minister and the first ever head of government to be openly gay, was elected. This same year strip clubs were banned, clearly displaying that the nation’s perspective of women had been positively altered and a respectful relationship between both genders established.

A radical and irrevocable change occurred in 1975 when the Icelandic women went on strike. The event was an unquestionable success and turning point in Icelandic history, with mass participation and support across the country. By abstaining from work for the duration of a single day these women brought society to a standstill and forced the pressing issue of gender

inequality into attention. Many progressive outcomes leading closer to an egalitarian nation were seen as a direct result of this symbolic protest – both political and societal. This solitary act of defiance completely altered gender perspectives on a nation-wide scale and gained recognition and respect for all women in Iceland.

Annotated Bibliography

Brewer, Kirstie. 2015. 'The day Iceland's women went on strike.' *BBC Magazine*, viewed 18 August 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34602822>

Brewer provides a succinct yet broad description of the 1975 Women's Day Off in this 2015 BBC Magazine article. She includes a variety of reliable and direct quotes from first hand experiences of the day, including those of Iceland's first female President, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir. This allows for a basic understanding of the event and its impacts on various groupings.

Einarsdóttir, E. and Steinhórsdóttir, G. 1977. 'The Day the children came to the offices.' *Scandinavian Review*, viewed 20 August 2018, <https://kvennasogusafn.is/index.php?page=Women-s-Day-Off-1975>

Provided by the official Women's History Archives in Iceland, this newspaper article from the *Scandinavian Review* - written two years after Kvinnafri - offers a more stipulated recount regarding the planning and purpose of the event. Also included are descriptions of the day, indications of the widespread participation it saw and the reasons behind its success. This source corroborates with Brewer's article in its descriptions.

Henley, J. 2018. 'Equality won't happen by itself': how Iceland got tough on gender pay gap' *The Guardian*, viewed 26 August 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/20/iceland-equal-pay-law-gender-gap-women-jobs-equality>

The Guardian is an independent newspaper based in the United Kingdom and owned by a British company known as the *Scott Trust Limited*. It is considered highly reliable although holds a slight bias towards the left wing. In this article, the current political climate surrounding the gender pay gap in Iceland is discussed and linked back to the 1975 strike. Various members of official organisations such as the Icelandic Women's Rights Association, the equality unit at Iceland's welfare ministry, the Business Iceland confederation and the Icelandic trade union confederation are directly quoted.

'Iceland set to tackle gender pay gap with world's toughest law'. 2017. *BBC Magazine*, viewed 26 August 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39501616>

This BBC Magazine article briefly outlines the new bill introduced in Iceland to combat the gender pay gap. The 1975 strike is referenced as inspiring contemporary women to protest in similar ways against the current wage discrimination in workplaces.

Johnson, M.E. 1984. 'Women in Iceland.' PhD Thesis Durham: Durham University, pp.235-272, viewed 29 July 2018, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/108401.pdf>

This source is the doctoral theses of M.E Johnson at Durham University. Johnson, now a professor at this university, travelled to Iceland and spoke to many locals about a wide

variety of topics revolving around women. The pages used provide a highly detailed description of Kvinnafri and all that it entailed. Johnson refers to this event as a “turning point in the history of women” and stipulates the connection between the event and many progressive changes for women which occurred in the following years. However, the source also displays recounts of the event which view it as a political failure, as although many steps have been taken towards gender equality in Iceland since, the process has remained slow and no immediate tangible effects were achieved. For these reasons it limits bias and is highly reliable.

Karlsson, G., Matthíasson, B. and Kristinsson, V. 2018. ‘Iceland.’ In: *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc, pp.1-2, viewed 12 August 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Iceland/Government-and-society#ref662252>

The Encyclopaedia Britannica is a highly commended and reliable source providing useful information on many topics. This particular edition extensively outlines much of Iceland’s history from a factual and unbiased standpoint. However, the section used – titled “women” – described the females in positions of high political power in the past few decades and made reference to the perceptions of Iceland as feminist-driven despite the continued lack of gender equality in the workforce. Also used was a section outlining the governing system in Iceland and the roles of which it consists.

Ministry of Social Affairs Iceland. 2018. ‘Gender Equality in Iceland’. Reykjavik: Ministry of Social Affairs Iceland and Centre for Gender Equality, pp.1-3, viewed 15 August 2018, https://www.stjornarradid.is/media/velferdarraduneyti-media/media/acrobat-skjol/jafnrettisstofa_stepping_stones.pdf

This is a government issued document outlining the historical stepping stones for women in Iceland. The 1975 Day Off is listed and the clear timeline format allows for an easy understanding of women’s rights before and after the event. As it is a government provided source it is highly reliable, fact based and unbiased.

Ministry of Welfare 2018. ‘New Icelandic law on Equal Pay Certification entered into force on January 1’, 2018. Reykjavik: Government Offices of Iceland, viewed 27 July 2018, <https://www.government.is/news/article/2018/01/04/New-Icelandic-law-on-Equal-Pay-Certification-entered-into-force-on-January-1-2018/>

This is an official government issued report on the equal pay certification law passed in January of 2018. The report outlines what the law entails and how it will be enforced. As it is a government provided source it is highly reliable, fact based and unbiased.

Moore. M. 2015. ‘Where to Invade Next: Iceland.’ Dog Eat Dog Films and IMG Films, The United States of America.

This source is a documentary written and directed by Michael Moore. The section of the film located in Iceland consists of interviews with females in positions of power or authority, such as successful CEO’s and Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, who talk about gender

equality laws in Iceland as well as the 1975 strike. These recounts told through the interviews as well as footage used from the day corroborate with many primary and secondary sources in displaying the number of people who attended the event in Reykjavik and also in the immediate effects that were seen.

Morgunbladid (1975). 'Women's outreach at Lækjartorgur.' pp.1, 8, viewed on 24 July 2018 https://timarit.is/view_page_init.jsp?issId=116302&pageId=1467993&lang=en&q=kvennafr

This is a primary source released the day after the event by a local Icelandic newspaper known as *Morgunbladid*. It corroborates with other primary and secondary sources in its facts regarding the number of women present at one congregation point on the day, and also in its recount of what events take place.

Rudolfsdottir, A. 2005. 'The day the women went on strike.' *The Guardian*, viewed on 24 July 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/oct/18/gender.uk>

Comprehensive, first-hand recounts of numerous individual's experiences of *Kvennafri* is incorporated into this *Guardian* article. Also included are incentives for the event, statistics on participation rates, the organisation progress, the impacts it had on men and the impacts on society in Iceland as a whole. This source corroborates with Brewer's article, the *Scandinavian review* and M.E Johnson's theses, displaying its reliability.

Sigmarsdóttir, S. 2018. 'Once more, Iceland has shown it is the best place in the world to be female.' *The Guardian*, viewed on 29 July 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/05/iceland-female-women-equal-pay-gender-equality>

Sif Sigmarsdóttir, an Icelandic bestselling author and political journalist, uses *Kvennafri* to display Iceland's historical ties to feminism and implies its significance as the beginning of a great age for women. She includes many reliable statistics relating to gender equality in Iceland. She also explains how Vigdís Finnbogadóttir's election as president shaped an entire generation's perception of women and suggests that this successful presidential campaign was a result of *Kvennafri*.

Statistics Iceland. 2018. 'Educational attainment of women and men differs by region.' viewed on 27 July 2018, <https://www.statice.is/publications/news-archive/social-affairs/women-and-men-in-iceland-2018/>

Statistics Iceland, a Government Ministry, releases important statistics regarding Iceland that are free for all to access. As they are provided by the government and are purely factual these statistics can be labelled as reliable. This particular report examines the 2018 education levels of men and women in different Icelandic regions, workforce participation rates and gender percentages relating to representation in the government.

The Executive Committee for *Women's Day Off*, 1975. 'Why a Day Off for Women?' The Women's History Archives in Iceland, Private Collection of Kvvennafrídagsnefndin. Reykjavik, viewed on 15 August 2018, <https://kvennasogusafn.is/index.php?page=Women-s-Day-Off-1975>

This is a primary source distributed by the Executive Committee for Women's Day Off (*Kvvennafrídagsnefndin*) to women across Iceland. The handout's purpose was to persuade women to participate in Kvvennafri by listing the reasons for the event and stating that "women's contribution to the community is underestimated". It is currently held by the Women's History Archives in Iceland and is highly reliable due to its source and factual nature.

The New York Times. 1975. 'Iceland: Women Strike.' p.34. viewed on 15 August 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/10/25/archives/iceland-women-strike.html?url=http%3A%2F%2Ftimesmachine.nytimes.com%2Ftimesmachine%2F1975%2F10%2F25%2F76619426.html>

Released by the New York Times on October 25th, 1975, this primary source corroborates with the Morgunbladid released on the same day as well as many secondary sources. The article describes the purpose of the event, matching those reasons listed in the Executive Committee's handout, and its success as well as outlining some of the issues caused by such a large strike.

The Women's History Archives. 2018. 'Women's Day Off'. 1975, viewed on 25 August 2018, <https://kvennasogusafn.is/index.php?page=Women-s-Day-Off-1975>

The Women's History Archives are Iceland's official archives for female-centric historical sources. The Executive Committee for Women's day off gave their private papers to the archives in 1976.

Topping, A. 2017. 'There's proof: electing women radically improves life for mothers and families.' *The Guardian*, viewed on 24 July 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/dec/06/iceland-women-government-better-for-mothers-america-lessons>

This Guardian article provides useful information about female politics in Iceland, with a particular focus on Vigdís Finnbogadóttir. The author, Guardian reporter Alexandra Topping, utilises quotes from Finnbogadóttir to prove how the normality of seeing a female in a position of power altered the perceptions of women's capabilities in Iceland.

World Economic forum .2017. 'The Global Gender Gap Index 2017'. The Global Gender Gap Index. Switzerland: World Economic Forum, pp.8-9, viewed on 23 August 2018, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2017>

The World Economic Forum posts an annual report known as the Global Gender Gap Index. This report ranks 144 countries in an order determined by their overall progress towards total gender equality through the consideration of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment.

Iceland has been placed number one on this scale for nine consecutive years as of 2017, proving the country's recent strive towards and success surrounding gender parity.

Women Political Leaders Global Forum. 2014. 'Why is Iceland the world's global leader in gender equality?.', viewed on 15 August 2018,
<https://www.womenpoliticalleaders.org/why-is-iceland-the-world-s-global-leader-in-gender-equality/>

The Women Political Leaders Global Forum's purpose is to connect female leaders and advocate for the increase in women holding political positions. The article used focuses on Iceland's legal sector and the nation's history of gender equality movements.