

**Statement**

**by**

**H.E. Mr. Árni Magnusson  
Minister for Social Affairs  
of Iceland**

**49th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women**

**High-level Plenary**

Madame Chair,

I would like to begin by thanking for the very good preparation for this important meeting, where we gather to underline the importance of the steps already taken and discuss our future cooperation in the field of gender equality.

Women's rights are affected by different factors in different parts of the world, as Secretary General Kofi Annan so cleverly underlined in his opening speech here yesterday. In countries that have been affected by armed conflict, women's rights need special attention. Armed conflict brings poverty and increases health problems while also destroying care infrastructures. In post conflict situations human rights of the most vulnerable, in these circumstances, women and girls, are often given low priority. We all have our responsibilities when it comes to trafficking in women. We can not just point at others, we must all be aware and take responsibility. And we must be aware of the importance of equal access to primary education, to property rights and employment.

My government underlines that UN goals will not be reached unless gender equality strategies are incorporated into our work both at the global level and the national level.

Madame Chair,

Allow me to give you a very brief overview of our activities in the field of gender equality in Iceland. OECD figures show that Iceland has one of the highest rates of female labour participation in the world. This indicates some success in implementation of gender policy. However, there are still challenges.

One of my greatest concerns, as a minister of gender equality in Iceland, is how to bridge the gender pay gap. We have made some progress in that field. The first step, obviously, has been to assess the extent of the gender pay gap. We are now involved in a project to establish comparable methods of measurement in all the five Nordic Countries, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The gender pay gap in Iceland also reflects the significant gender divide in the labour market. Prevention of gender-related wage discrimination is one of the key focuses of the current Gender Equality Action Plan, adopted by the Icelandic Parliament in 2004. We must take serious actions.

Madame Chair,

In my view the Beijing Platform for action should also contribute to economic development through the creation of a society built upon gender equality where women can actively contribute to the economy. With this in view the Icelandic Parliament passed legislation on Maternity Leave, which took full effect in January 2003. This made a fundamental reform of the previous system.

The new act is intended to make it easier for parents working outside the home - both mothers and fathers - to strike a balance between the demands of their careers and their families. Another aim is to promote a sharing of parental responsibilities and gender equality in the labour market.

The main features of the new system are that women and men each have an equal non-transferable right to take three months' leave in connection with the birth of a child. They are also able to divide a further three months' leave between themselves as they wish. A parent who has been active on the Icelandic labour market has the right to receive 80 % of salaries during the leave period.

The emphasis is on flexibility in how parents choose to use these rights. Judging from the high percentage of Icelandic fathers taking Maternity leave, the act is considered to be a success. In 2003, around 82% of men utilized their rights, taking on average more than 90 days leave from work to take care of their newborn child.

These are still preliminary figures, but will only get higher. We in Iceland are proud of this progressive legislation. We do hope that Icelanders have set an example which others might want to follow, just as Iceland has built parts of its' legislation on gender equality on examples from other countries.

Madame Chair,

The path to gender equality is by no means straightforward. However, the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, together with the other relevant conventions provide us with a clear set of rules and direction. It is in all our interest to keep up the good work and continue to pave the path towards gender equality.

But as Secretary General, Kofi Annan, stated in his speech yesterday, it is not only the responsibility of women. It is the responsibility of both genders. Yes, we, the men, must get on board the boat with the women. We can not just sit by, it is our responsibility, and I speak to all the men present here today and urge them to call upon other men in their countries, and internationally, to take action hand in hand with the women. It is my personal opinion that only by so doing will we be able to reach gender equality in the future. So, men, get on board !

Thank you, Madame Chair.