

# ICELAND

## **Part One – Overview of achievements and challenges in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment**

The Icelandic Government has taken systematic steps to introduce and promote gender equality in all areas of society. The fact is that in recent years, the influence of international human rights conventions has increased significantly within the Icelandic legal system and the application of Icelandic law. For example, it can be mentioned that several changes were made in 1995 to provisions concerning economic, social and cultural rights in the Constitution and some new rights were added, *cf.* the Constitutional Act No. 97/1995. It should be noted that in the explanatory report to the bill amending the Constitution, a clear reference is made to international conventions in the field of human rights as guiding principles on how the Constitution should be interpreted. For example, concerning Article 65 of the Constitution reference is made to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

It can be stated that the new human rights provisions in the Constitution have widened the constitutional protection of various rights guaranteed in international human rights conventions. This has been manifested in various judgments of the Supreme Court and other courts, which refer increasingly to international human rights conventions when applying and interpreting Icelandic law. It should be mentioned that following the constitutional amendments and the practice of the courts in recent years, a lively debate and public awareness of human rights has awakened in Icelandic society. Accordingly, people in Iceland are better informed of their rights than before, and know that these rights are enforceable through the Icelandic legal system and international monitoring bodies.

Iceland has had special legislation intended to ensure equality between women and men and their equal status in all respects since 1976. All individuals are to have equal possibilities to benefit from their own efforts and develop their abilities, independent of their gender. The new Gender Equality Act of 2000 revoked the former Gender Equality Act, No. 28/1991. The Act was revised for two main reasons: on the one hand to take account of the changes that had occurred in the field of gender equality and changes of emphasis in projects and methodology, and on the other to stimulate development towards equality in important areas in society. When the Act was revised, therefore, attention was given to the situation regarding gender equality in the administration and the definition of specific projects to work on. The Beijing Platform for Action and other international instruments on gender equality were also taken into special consideration. Furthermore, it was emphasized that gender equality must be taken seriously as the responsibility of both women and men.

In order to promote gender equality the Government has run four-year action plans; under Article 9 of the Gender Equality Act, the Minister of Social Affairs shall present to Parliament, within one year of parliamentary elections, a motion for a parliamentary resolution on a plan on equality issues after having received proposals made by the various ministries and the Centre for Gender Equality. This plan includes a detailed plan of action and an estimate of the funding needed for individual projects on equality issues.

Since 1992, Parliament has passed three four-year action plans on measures to implement gender equality. In 2001 a decision was made on extending the action plan then current (1998-2001) for two years (2002-2003) and using the opportunity to focus on gender mainstreaming methods. This was further supported by the fact that some of the projects to be carried out were unfinished or needed updating. The revised edition was presented to Parliament in April 2002. During the winter 2003-2004, the Minister of Social Affairs submitted a proposal to Parliament on a new action plan which was accepted in the spring 2004. This plan will expire in May 2008.

The overall conclusion on these plans is that they have had considerable effect in almost all fields of action. For example, the proportion of women in the police force and among prison warders rose; one of the projects of the Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs in the plan from 1998 was to engage more women as police and prison warders during the time-span of the plan. In 1996, women accounted for 4.3% of the national police force; in 2001 the number of women had increased to 8.02%. In 1997, women who graduated from the Police Training College constituted 7.14% of the total. This number has steadily increased and in the spring of 2001, 16.13% of the graduates were women. In 1996, 7.7% of prison guards in the correction facilities were women; in 2001 this ratio had increased to 15.6%. This has mainly been done by encouraging women to apply for new posts within the system.

The plan for the period 1998–2001 also contained a special provision on a statistical project designed to implement the Government’s decision that data in all statistical summaries and reports should be analysed by gender. Two years after the Althingi approved the action plan, it was decided to put the following special provision on statistical analyses in the Gender Equality Act, No. 96/2000:

*“In the production of official statistics on individuals and in interview and opinion surveys, information shall be collected, compiled, analysed and presented on the basis of gender unless specific circumstances such as protection of privacy argue against this.”*

As an example of policy-making achievement in the promotion of gender equality over the past decade it can be mentioned that in early 1998, the Minister of Education, Science and Culture announced an educational initiative by launching an ambitious new school policy for the primary and lower secondary level, and also the upper secondary level. When the National Curriculum Guide was drawn up, a clear policy on gender equality was followed; this was also done by committees appointed by the Ministry and in the awarding of grants provided by the Ministry to various research projects in this area. The Ministry published a brochure, *Responsibility - Freedom - Equal rights – Choice*. This brochure contains guidelines and information concerning alternatives and options that are available after completion of compulsory school. It also stresses freedom of choice and the responsibility that this entails, and points out that in the “new school policy” every pupil will be able to find educational alternatives according to her or his ability. To sum up, the essence of the new school policy is an attempt at creating an efficient but flexible educational system, a system that focuses on the needs of every pupil, increasing their range of choice, but simultaneously instilling academic discipline, good working skills, healthy competition and enhanced student responsibility in their studies.

In 2000, about 54% of upper senior school pupils were girls and 46% were boys. Girls are in the majority in all courses of study in the upper secondary schools with the exception of two: in crafts and technical trades they are very much in the minority (9%), and in Natural Science programmes the division is finely balanced, with 49% girls and 51% boys. Women continue to form the majority (62%) of students at university level in all fields except engineering, mathematics, and computer science. A deliberate effort has been made to increase the number of women who attend these programmes. In the national action plan, valid 2002-2004, a plan was operated to encourage girls' leadership and to improve the number of women seeking education in the natural sciences, mathematics and engineering. The project was sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Industry and Trade, the Equal Status Council and the University of Iceland.

In recent years, the Icelandic Government has put emphasis on taking preventive measures against gender-based violence, especially against trafficking and prostitution. One of the Government's first actions to combat trafficking in human beings was to amend the Foreign Nationals' Right to Work Act so as to make it necessary to apply for work permits for women coming from non-EEA countries who intend to work as strip-tease dancers in clubs. Before 2000 these dancers were defined as artists and did not need special work permits if they stayed in Iceland shorter than four weeks.

Since then, further actions have been taken to combat trafficking. The Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Social Affairs joined together in participating in the Nordic-Baltic campaign against trafficking in women, which was formally launched in Tallinn, Estonia, on 29<sup>th</sup> May 2002. In the campaign, the Nordic countries and the Baltic States combined their efforts to combat the problem, and the campaign was supported and financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers. In addition, each individual state involved ran its own campaign, the Nordic Council of Ministers paying for the campaigns in the Baltic States. Iceland's campaign was launched at the end of February 2003. A working group was established in that context which consisted of 13 persons from various organizations, governmental and non-governmental, that were connected with the problem of trafficking in women in some way. The co-ordinators of the group were from the Ministries of Justice and Social Affairs. The emphasis in the Icelandic campaign was on raising public awareness on what trafficking in women involves and seeking to bring about a change in the attitude towards women as a commodity.

Iceland co-operates in a Nordic-Baltic Task Force against Trafficking in Human Beings, which was established in August 2002. The Task Force consists of two members from each country: a State Secretary and one person from a relevant ministry. The aim of the Task Force is to carry on with the work that has already been started in the Nordic and Baltic States. The main purpose of this new Task Force, which is appointed on a political level, is to facilitate co-ordination and oversee the work against trafficking in human beings, and to enhance the treatment of the issue on a political level in all participating countries. The overall objective is to counteract trafficking in human beings, especially women and children, in the Nordic and Baltic countries. Special attention is to be paid to the most common and worst forms of trafficking, such as trafficking for prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour and harmful child labour. The term of the Task Force is until August 2006 and it shall meet three times pr. year.

In March 2003, Parliament passed a new act amending the Penal Code under which trafficking in persons will be punishable by up to eight years in prison. Work has been done under the auspices of the Ministry of Justice on the protection of witnesses and an improvement in the legal position of the victims of criminal offences. Iceland also Participates in a Nordic co-operation on witness and victim protection.

An *ad hoc* working group on unaccompanied children has recently finalized its work. The main task of the working group was to establish special system of best practice and channels, so that when a case of an unaccompanied child arises, everyone will know their role. This will be the case for all children under 18 years of age. Often unaccompanied children can be victims of trafficking and the system is also designed to protect them.

In January 2003 the Minister of Social Affairs appointed a committee on measures to combat violence against women. The Ministries of Justice, Social Affairs, Education, Culture and Science and Health and Social Security, and also the Union of Local Authorities, are represented on the committee. Its mandate is for four years and its task will be to co-ordinate actions taken by the authorities aimed at combating violence against women. The committee will make a survey of actions that have already been taken and give advice on further reforms in this field. The committee is also to organize campaigns and action programmes aimed at informing the public on violence against women. The committee will make it a priority to work closely with NGOs that are concerned with the issue.

## **Part Two – Progress in implementation of the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action and the further initiatives and actions identified in the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly**

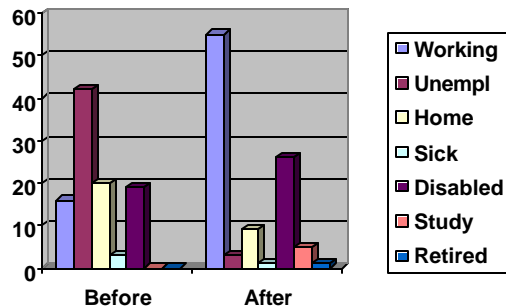
It was decided to restrict the discussion in this section to four fields in which projects have been carried out: women and economy, women in power and decision-making, women and health and women and peacekeeping.

### *A. Women and economy*

As is stated above, the Government of Iceland has made great efforts to ensure equality of access to education at all levels of the educational system. Furthermore, special attention has been given to improving the situation of women on the labour market, both as regards education and other types of support. Women's Education Centres have been established in three places in Iceland (in Northern, Western and Northwestern Iceland) and two other educational centres (in Northeastern and Eastern Iceland) have adopted the ideology for other courses, for both women and men. All women's centres have shown similar results.

The Women's Education Centre in Akureyri has published an evaluation of its work from 1994-2000. The evaluation included 203 women born in the years 1925-84. Before entering the programme, 42% of the women were registered unemployed, 20% were without employment but not registered, 19% were on disability benefits, 3% were registered sick and 16% had some part-time work.

1–5 years after the completion of the programme, 55% were employed, 5% were continuing their studies at other educational institutions (such as universities), 9% were unregistered unemployed, 3% were registered unemployed, 1% were retired, 1% were registered sick and 26% were receiving disability benefits.



Eighty-three per cent claimed that their self-esteem had grown considerably or dramatically, 75% claimed that their ability to communicate had increased significantly and 49% felt they were in a stronger position on the labour market. Eighty-eight per cent claimed that the programme had increased their overall life-competence.

The Women’s Education Centre in Northwestern Iceland has been a part of the programmes for rural women. Their results are very similar to those in Akureyri described above. They also reasoned that the government’s outlay on the Women’s Education Centre had been recovered in full in terms of saved unemployment payments in less than a year.

The Ministry of Industry and Commerce has made a significant effort towards increasing the share of women as entrepreneurs and employers. A recent survey by the Ministry revealed that women constituted only 18% of the owners of Icelandic businesses. Although the women who participated in the survey agreed that they were generally less likely to apply for grants and had less confidence in their abilities to start and run their own firms, research has demonstrated that firms with women at the helm have a smaller chance of going bankrupt than firms where men are in charge.

Several projects have been run by the Ministry and its directorates to increase women’s share in business. These include services through an entrepreneurial center housed at ICETEC. The emphasis is on providing women with assistance in the phase of establishing a business. The purpose is to make women more capable of developing their business ideas, assist them in defining information and to create a network of women in a similar position.

ICETEC runs a 15-week course for would-be women entrepreneurs. The course is conducted twice yearly, and more than 200 women have completed it since its inception. The final assignment of the course is the writing and presentation of a fully-fledged business plan. A survey on the success of the program demonstrated that almost 60% of the women who have attended are operating their own business. Most believe that the course has been very valuable to their success in running the business, and that they are more competent managers after its

completion. Most of the firms resulting from the course are small, with fewer than 10 employees, but there are some significant exceptions to this. The course is held to encourage women's success in the Icelandic business arena and to create a balance between women and men. In the autumn of 2003, the course was offered to women in rural areas for the first time, using distance learning facilities in three hubs around the country.

SBA Women's Business Centre is an interactive website on business related issues dedicated entirely to women entrepreneurs. It is hosted at ICETEC and aims to provide women access to the knowledge they need to run their own businesses and thus gain financial independence.

The Icelandic Association of Women Entrepreneurs is an association of about 400 women active in business. The association is housed within the entrepreneurial centre at ICETEC. The main objective of the association is to protect the interests and enhance co-operation and collaboration between women in business, specifically by making them an interesting target group for banks and other lenders, and an interest group as employers.

A two-year agreement was signed by various parties in Iceland in April 2000 with the aim of increasing the role of women in the Icelandic labour market, with particular emphasis on leadership roles. It was signed by the University of Iceland, the Centre for Gender Equality, the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and some private companies. A special committee was appointed to supervise the programme. This pilot programme has been undertaken to enhance female leadership in economic life and to encourage women to choose male-dominated fields of studies, especially IT and engineering, in higher education. Male students were also encouraged to enter into or apply for female-dominated studies, such as nursing and social work. The programme started in September 2000 and has been very successful. In this way, the Committee on Equal Rights at the University of Iceland is making efforts to eradicate stereotyped gender roles in education and diminish the gender pay gap in the knowledge society of the future.

In October 2002, as part of a gender equality campaign, the University of Iceland, the Centre for Gender Equality and the Commercial Workers' Union of Reykjavík, in collaboration with a private company, published an educational booklet entitled *The Key to Success on the Employment Market*. This is intended to give those who are about to complete third-level education and enter the employment market practical information about looking for jobs and taking their first steps in their working careers. The booklet was thought of as an encouragement to women to prepare themselves well for their future careers and to consider the earning potential when choosing postgraduate studies and work.

Special grants have been made to women for running businesses. The main aims of this have been to broaden the range of employment opportunities, stimulate employment in the rural areas and give women greater access to capital, not least in cases where they are at a disadvantage when applying for assistance from the traditional sources of credit. One of the projects supported since 1998 has been a special loan guarantee fund for women, originally set up for a trial period of three years. It is intended to support women in new ventures and

participation in the business world by granting guarantees for loans; these guarantees may be used as collateral under the rules of the fund. An examination of the fund's operations and results was made at the end of the trial period in 2000, and it was decided to continue its operations.

The main findings of the examination were as follows:

1. The fund had approved guarantees for 28 projects during the three years of its operations. In most cases these were innovative ventures that were important contributions to the business and employment sectors in the rural areas. Many of these new ventures were in the clothing and textile industries; others were in other types of industry and in commerce and services.
2. The existence of the fund was of vital importance for the projects that it supported by granting guarantees. Without it, very few of them would have been started. In most cases, the loans granted guarantee amount to half or more of the total financing of the projects.
3. The extent of the loan guarantee fund's activities is not great in terms of the overall participation by women in running businesses: there were about 5,000 companies either owned or directed by women in Iceland in 2000. Under the rules of the fund, projects must be controlled by women, they must involve innovation and may not be in competition with comparable enterprises in the same area.
4. The fund's financial standing is sound. About ISK 30 million has been put into the fund; the majority of the loans it has guaranteed are being repaid on time, and so far the fund's guarantees have not been called upon to pay off any loan. Enterprises that have received guarantees from the fund are generally small, with an average of 2.4 employees in 2 full-time-equivalent positions in each workplace; in about 40% of cases there was only 1 employee. The fund has put up guarantees for loans to enterprises that provide employment for more than 50 employees in just over 40 full-time-equivalent positions. In addition, 15-20 people are employed either for specific projects or on a part-time basis, working at home, at three of these enterprises. In interviews, 60% of the loan recipients said the fund was a good initiative, but that it should be available to more women; a further 10% doubted that their projects could have been put into practice without the guarantees provided by the fund.

It can be said the Government has faced great challenges to close the gender pay gap, and its aim is to find ways of preventing gender-related wage discrimination in Iceland. Under the Gender Equality Act, employers are forbidden to discriminate between their employees in wage payments or other terms of service on the grounds of gender. If it can be argued that a woman and a man who work for the same employer receive different wages or terms of service for work that is comparable and of equal value, then the employer is required to demonstrate that if there is any difference, it is based on factors other than the gender of the employees. Nevertheless, the gender pay gap remains approximately 7.5-11% in favour of men.

There is a general consensus of expectation regarding the Maternity/Paternity Leave and Parental Leave Act, especially in changing the gender-divided labour market situation. The main

objective of the act is to create conditions in which men and women are able to participate equally in paid employment and other work outside the home, and to guarantee children time with both parents. The 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 those of their families. Another aim is to promote a sharing of parental responsibilities and gender equality on the labour market.

The main features of the new system following the amendments are that women and men each have an equal, non-transferable, right to take three months' leave in connection with the birth, first-time adoption or fostering of a child, irrespective of whether they work in the private or the public sector, or are self-employed. 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 for six months preceding the first day of maternity/paternity leave has the right to receive payments during the leave period. These payments amount to 80% of average gross wages or calculated remuneration over the twelve-month continuous period ending two months before the first day of the leave. A special Maternity/Paternity Leave Fund, which is financed by social security tax, was established in order to make these payments.

The emphasis is on flexibility in the taking of this leave: parents are able to take their leave in a continuous stretch, or in several shorter periods and/or to take it by working part time. Employers are obliged to make efforts to meet employees' wishes with regard to the taking of maternity/paternity leave. Mothers must, however, go on maternity leave for at least the first two weeks after the birth of a child.

The authorities and the social partners have made extensive efforts to publicise the new aspects of the Act on Maternity/Paternity Leave and Parental Leave, with brochures and active information such as seminars and conferences, involving, among others, the health care service and parents themselves. If we assume that the pay-gap and women's low representation in the top levels of business management are at least partly due to their responsibilities for family and children, this Act should result in creating a more equal situation. The statistics imply that fathers are taking their paternity leave.

The local authorities have also made it a priority to provide child-care services for the great majority of children under the age of six. The child-care service falls into two types: kindergarten and day care provided in private homes by registered "day-mothers". Children generally go first to day-mothers (who take children from the age of six months) and then to a kindergarten. In elementary/compulsory school, there are after-school programmes available in many local government areas for the age groups from 6 to 9 years. However, the situation varies in rural areas: some rural regions and local authorities can provide arrangements of the type described above, while others do not have the necessary resources.

### *B. Women in power and decision-making*

Regarding the role of women in decision making, the Minister of Social Affairs appointed a committee to increase women's participation in politics in September 1998. The committee included representatives of all the political parties represented in the Althingi



(parliament) in 1998, and also of the Women's Rights Association and the Gender Equality Council. The committee submitted its report early in 2003. The committee's first task was to work towards increasing the number of women elected to the Althingi in the 1999 elections. To begin its work, the committee had the market-research company Gallup conduct a survey based on three questions concerning women's participation in politics. This was put to a random sample taken from the National Register, and the response rate was 72.7%. The main point to emerge was that a majority (79.7%) thought that women's role in politics should be increased; only 3.5% were opposed to any such increase. Women were more in favour of this than men: 83% of women were in favour and 75% of men. In its work, the committee made it a priority to consult the women's movements within the political parties, and held several meetings with them before the general election of 1999. It also mounted a special advertising campaign which attracted a great deal of attention. In this, the leaders of political parties co-operated in showing that the sexes are in many ways different and can not completely place themselves in each other's shoes. The aim of this campaign was to influence political leaders, draw attention to the way candidates were ranked in the electoral lists, stimulate discussion on this point in the media and among the general public and make people think about why it was necessary to involve women more in politics. The committee also sought to establish co-operation with the media and held meetings with the editors, news editors and programming directors of the main media in Iceland. After the elections 1999, 35% of Althingi members were women.

The committee continued its work after the elections of 1999, turning its attention to the next local government elections, which were held in spring 2002. Courses organized by the committee under the title *Support for women in politics – social affairs, speeches, articles and the media* were held all over the country. The committee also organized the publication of publicity material on women and the media, the aim of which was to urge the media to give women and men as far as possible equal opportunities to express themselves in the media. Members of the committee also took part in various conferences both in Iceland and abroad, and held public meetings in the electoral constituencies in Iceland. The proportion of women in local government has gone up from 28.2% in 1998 to 31.2% in 2002. Women are now in majority in 10 local authorities. However, in nine local authorities there are no female representatives; for comparison, this was the case in 15 local authorities after the 1998 elections and in 32 local authorities after the 1994 elections. The proportion of women is highest in the Greater Reykjavík area, where women account for 44% of representatives and men for 56%.

In October 2000 the Prime Minister's office appointed a committee of three specialists in order to create a plan for research projects on women's economic situation and power. According to the committee's suggestions four research projects are being carried out:

- Statistical analysis. Gendered statistics will be gathered showing the situation and influence of women in the Icelandic economy in comparison to men's.
- A study on the gender pay gap on the Icelandic labour market. The study was made in cooperation with the Gender Equality Council and the results were presented in September 2002
- A study on the situation of women in managerial positions. Information is to be gathered on the number of women and men as managers in Icelandic firms, both private and public.

- General opinion survey. The plan is to carry out a survey on the opinion of Icelandic people on various matters that can influence women's economic situation and influence in decision-making in Iceland.

Early in 2001, The Prime Minister appointed another committee with the task of gathering information on whether and how gender equality policies are observed in all governmental and local authorities' plans and actions. The committee's report was published in November 2002. The main conclusions were that the authorities show an obvious will to ensure gender equality.

The committee made the following recommendations:

- More emphasis should be placed on education on gender equality and gender mainstreaming for public employees.
- The ministries' gender equality co-ordinators should assume a more significant role and all ministries should set up gender equality plans.
- The Association of Local Authorities should encourage local authorities to fulfil their duties by law, by appointing gender equality committees and undertaking programmes on matters of gender equality.
- A gender equality guide/index should be published to ensure mainstreaming.
- The government's Action Programme on Gender Equality should be evaluated by an independent party.

### *C. Women and Health*

The health sector is regulated according to the Health Services Act No. 97/1990, under which all inhabitants, regardless of gender, have right of access to the best possible health service at any given time for the protection of their mental, social and physical health. The main objective of the Patients' Rights Act, No. 74/1997, is to ensure that there is no discrimination against patients on grounds of gender, religion, beliefs, nationality, race, skin colour, financial status, family relation or status in other respect.

The health service in Iceland is primarily financed by the National Government. Financing is mainly based on taxes or 85% and 15% is fee for service.

The country is divided into health care regions, each with their own primary health care centres, some of which are run jointly with the local community hospital. The primary health-care centres are responsible for general treatment and care, examination, home nursing and preventive measures such as family planning, maternity care, child health care and school health care.

The Minister of Health and Social Security has appointed a project committee concerning women's health issues. The committee will prioritise task and projects, create action plans and put these plans into effect. The purpose of the project committee is also to make sure that the health care institutions and service providers will focus on and emphasise the different needs and various circumstances of men and women. The committee has suggested to the Minister of Health to conduct a Health Interview survey to collect information about women's health issues

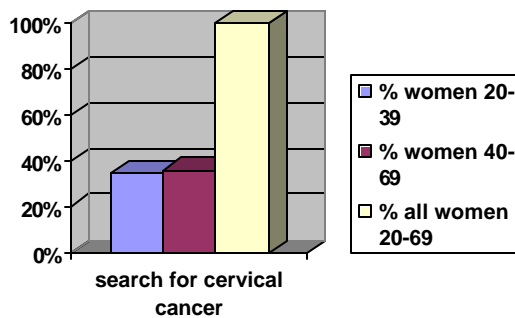
in Iceland. This survey will be a part of EUROHIS, which will make comparison with other European countries possible. This survey will also produce socio-economic data.

As an example, it can be mentioned that in special programmes against drug and tobacco consumption, it has been noted that the causes of abuse for women and girls, on the one hand, and men and boys, on the other hand, may be different. The statistical information regarding this are analysed by gender. These results indicate that specific gender-based programmes are needed.

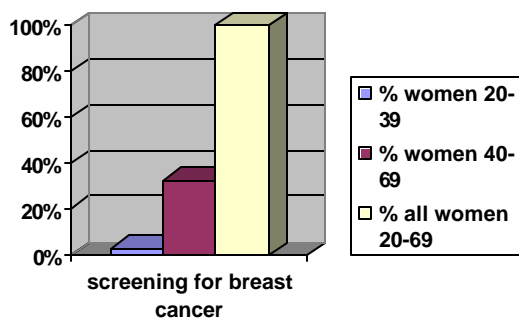
Men and boys include the majority of those who are injured, commit suicide and become substance abusers. This is a major health problem, and it is therefore important to identify its causes. The Directorate of Health has implemented a special project to prevent suicides. The project involves the health care sector, the social services, the clergy, the police and the school system. Although more men than women commit suicide, more women attempt to commit suicides than men. The project offers a education about depression and suicides, a brochure, poster and a short film have been published and a telephone help line and a website are also available.

There has been a cervical cancer screening programme since 1964 and a breast cancer screening programme since 1973. Women aged 20-69 are advised to have a check for cervical cancer every other year; women aged 40-69 are advised to have breast screening/mammography every other year.

Participation rates in checks for cervical cancer in 2000 were as follows: Women 20-39: 34.7%, women 40-69: 36% (as a % of all women of that age). Participation rates in screening for breast cancer in 2000: Women 20-39: 2.9%, women 40-69: 32.7% (as a % of all women of that age).



**This chart shows the proportion of women who had a check for cervical cancer in 2000 as a percentage of all women aged 20-69.**



This chart shows the proportion of women who had breast cancer screening in 2000 as a percentage of all women aged 20-69.

#### *D. Women and peacekeeping*

The Icelandic Government is increasing its contributions to international peacekeeping efforts. The Iceland Crisis Response Team was formally established in February 2002 as a separate entity within the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. When vacancies are advertised, women are especially urged to apply. At the end of 2003, the Centre for Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Iceland received a grant from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to conduct a study on the mainstreaming of gender equality in Icelandic peacekeeping operations. In the years 2002-2003 Iceland contributed a total of 81 persons to international peacekeeping missions. In 2002 the total number was 36, of which 9 were women. In 2003 the total was 45, of which 11 were women. The relatively low number of women is partly due to the low ratio of women in the professions requested from abroad, i.e. police and air traffic control personnel. Following a request from the United Nations (UN) that female police officers be sent to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had a meeting with the Association of Female Police Officers. The results of the meeting were reported to the UN. Subsequently, women were especially encouraged to apply for posts in the Balkans and two Icelandic women were sent to Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2000-2001. Additionally, the Government sponsors the operation of the UNIFEM offices in Kosovo, where efforts are directed towards ensuring women's power and influence in government. Four Icelandic specialists have directed these offices since 2000.

## **Part Three – Institutional Development**

### *The Centre for Gender Equality*

The Gender Equality Act of 2000 established a special new institution, the Centre for Gender Equality (Jafnréttisstofa) which is administered by the Ministry of Social Affairs and is entrusted with the monitoring of the application of the Act. The new institution has taken over most of the tasks of the former Equal Status Bureau. Its tasks include:

- to provide education and information,
- to provide counselling for the authorities, institutions, companies, individuals and non-governmental organizations,
- to provide suggestions and proposals on activities in the matters of gender equality to the Minister of Social Affairs, the Gender Equality Council and other authorities,
- to increase activity in matters of gender equality, i.a. by increased participation of men in such activities,
- to monitor developments in society in matters of equality, i.a. through the gathering of information and research,
- to provide assistance to gender equality committees, gender equality counsellors and the gender equality representatives of local authorities, institutions and companies and
- to undertake other tasks consistent with the aim and scope of the Act as further instructed by the Minister.

Public institutions, employers and non-governmental organizations are obliged to provide the Centre for Gender Equality with general information which it may need for its operations. In special circumstances the Centre for Gender Equality may initiate legal proceedings to obtain recognition of the rights of the plaintiff on the basis of the opinions of the Gender Equality Complaints Committee.

### *The Gender Equality Council*

The Gender Equality Council is a nine-member council, appointed by the Minister of Social Affairs. The chairperson is appointed without nomination. The Icelandic Confederation of Labour, the Confederation of State and Municipal Employees, the Ministry of Finance, the University of Iceland, the Federation of Icelandic Women's Associations, the Women's Rights Association of Iceland, the Confederation of Icelandic Employers and the Union of Local Authorities in Iceland shall nominate one member each. The parties shall, when possible, nominate one man and one woman for each seat on the Gender Equality Council, giving the opportunity of appointing an approximately equal number of women and men. The Council shall make systematic efforts to equalize the status and the right of women and men in the labour market and shall submit proposals to the Minister of Social Affairs on measures to be taken in this field.

### *Gender equality co-ordinators*

Each Ministry is required to appoint a gender equality co-ordinator to monitor activities in matters of gender equality within the sphere of the ministry and the institutions working under its auspices. The co-ordinators shall give the Centre for Gender Equality an annual report containing the ministry's activities.

### *Gender Equality Complaints Committee*

The Gender Equality Complaints Committee includes three lawyers appointed by the Minister of Social Affairs; the Supreme Court of Iceland appoints two, including the chairperson and the vice-chairperson. The role of the Complaints Committee is to consider and issue in writing a substantiated opinion on whether the provisions of the Gender Equality Act have been violated. The Committee's opinion are not open to appeal to a higher authority.

Individuals and non-governmental organizations, in their own name or on behalf of their members, who consider that they have been subjected to violations of the act, may seek redress from the Gender Equality Complaints Committee. Under special circumstances, the Complaints Committee is permitted to consider cases referred to it by others. Most of the complaints brought before the committee pertain to alleged discrimination in the labour market, including employment, employment termination or wages.

The conclusions of the Committee are not binding on the relevant parties; instead, the Committee presents a reasoned call for amendments, i.e., if it is of the opinion that a certain action is in breach of the provisions of law.

### *Gender Equality counsellor*

A gender equality counsellor situated in the northwest of the country has been working on programmes to improve the situation of women in the area and to increase their opportunities to work outside of their home. Her work has been successful; she has organised projects, courses and surveys and provided personal counselling. The Ministry of Social Affairs and the Institute of Regional Development have established a position of a gender equality counsellor in the northeastern part of the country and are preparing to do so in other rural areas. The gender equality counsellor in the Northwest and Northeast have been involved in a Northern Periphery project on the situation of rural women.

### *Different committees*

Many official committees have been at work mapping the gender situation and setting the agenda for the future. The committee which the Minister of Social Affairs appointed in January 2003 on measures to combat violence against women can be mentioned as an example. Its mandate is for four years and its task will be to co-ordinate actions taken by the authorities aimed at combating violence against women.

### *The local authorities*

Many local authorities have been extremely active in measures to achieve gender equality in various fields. Under the Gender Equality Act, local authorities are to appoint 3-5-member equal status committees which shall be responsible for matters of equality within each local authority area in accordance with provisions of this Act. These committees shall serve in a consultative capacity to the local authorities in matters of equality between women and men, monitor and initiate specific measures for the purpose of ensuring the equal status and equal rights of women and men. The committees shall be entitled to give comments on, or undertake the preparation of, a four-year municipal programmes on matters of equality which shall be presented within one year from the time of the municipal elections.

### *Statistics*

In the production of official statistics on individuals and in interviews and opinion surveys information shall be collected, compiled, analysed and presented on the basis of gender unless specific circumstances, such as protection of privacy, prevent this.

### *Gender equality programmes*

There is a provision in the Gender Equality Act stating that institutions and enterprises with more than 25 employees are to set themselves gender equality programmes or to make special provisions regarding gender equality in their employment policies.

#### **Part Four – Main Challenges and action to address them**

Much has been achieved in recent years but the Government is fully aware that additional effort must be made. It is vital that gender equality should be under constant discussion, and the aim is that gender equality considerations be involved in decision-making in as many fields as possible. This policy is still called for, as the results to date are not considered adequate. It is important, however, to remember that mainstreaming is not an aim in itself: the intention is to establish gender equality in all areas of society, both in decision making and policy formation and in the home.

The Minister of Social Affairs presented a draft parliamentary resolution for a four-year Gender Equality Action Plan in winter 2003-2004. It is hoped that the projects under this plan will produce results. One of the main areas of emphasis is to prevent gender-related wage discrimination. The trend in this area has certainly been in the right direction, but the evidence indicates that greater efforts are called for. It is also aimed to increase publicity and awareness of gender equality issues, it being of vital importance that those involved in policymaking and decisions have the necessary knowledge of the issues involved. This applies equally to the staff of central government and the local authorities who are responsible for setting policies and monitoring their implementation. Also, for the first time, explicit provisions are made on follow-up measures connected with the action programme. Allowance is made for a survey to be made of the results achieved by the government in the middle of the term of the programme, and again at the end of the programme. It is vital that each project, and the results it has produced, should be evaluated separately, irrespective of whether or not it has been completed.

In this survey, only a few examples have been taken of what the Government of Iceland, either independently or in collaboration with other bodies, has undertaken in order to achieve gender equality in various fields, some of which have been aimed specifically at increasing the role played by women. For further information, please refer to the Government of Iceland's report on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.