



The Permanent Mission of Iceland to the United Nations

**Statement by
H.E. Mr. Árni Páll Arnason,
Minister of Social Affairs and Social Security of Iceland**

54th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

2 March 2010

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

www.iceland.org/un/nyc

**The Permanent Mission of Iceland to the United Nations
800 Third Ave. 36th fl. - Tel 212-593-2700. - Fax 212-593-6269**

As we, representatives of governments of the United Nations, gather here on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, we must recognise that although we have made some gains towards gender equality in the last fifteen years, serious challenges remain.

Presently we see a real risk that the global economic and financial crisis will further lead to the disadvantaged situation of women. This illustrates the importance of the effective implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Let us remember that the advancement of gender equality is not only a goal in itself but an important precondition for meeting the Millennium Development Goals and making the world a safer and better place. In recent times, my country has witnessed some very positive developments as regards gender equality. Last year, for the first time, a woman was appointed Prime Minister, the number of men and women in the government became equal and the representation of women in Parliament rose to 43%. These changes have brought Iceland to the top of the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index for 2009.

However, challenges remain.

One of the most pressing is bridging the gender pay gap. A study conducted in 2008 found that the gap was still approximately 16%, despite the fact that Iceland has for almost five decades had legislation in force on equal pay for equal work.

We are currently dealing with the repercussions of the financial crisis, which hit Iceland particularly hard with a combined currency and banking crisis. Dealing with the resulting recession is today our primary task. This requires fiscal prudence at the same time as positive measures to ensure social fairness are in great demand.

Our challenge in all our work is to ensure that both sexes benefit equally – or suffer equally – from economic measures and that a gender perspective is a primary concern in all policy and decision making.

We are mindful to maintain and improve as possible the social measures already in place, which were designed to strengthen gender equality. A case in point is our parental leave system and to encourage fathers to use their rights. Although the government has been forced to lower the payments, we have been able to safeguard the system under which both parents enjoy equal rights, with some of the leave entitlements non-transferable. So far, over 90% of fathers have taken the leave they are entitled to.

Violence against women is another factor where we want to increase our focus. Last year, the Icelandic parliament enacted a law criminalizing the buying of sex. Iceland has thereby joined Sweden and Norway in defining prostitution as one form of violence against women that must be eliminated. We are also strengthening our efforts in dealing with human trafficking.

The Icelandic government has defined, and continues to define, gender equality as one of the priorities of its foreign policy. Special focus has been given to women's empowerment, particularly as regards development co-operation, climate change and peace processes.

Later this year, the international community will celebrate the tenth anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. It is worrying that despite some progress made in the last decade, the knowledge and experience of women is still consistently ignored and women remain largely excluded from peace processes. This we must change, as equal participation of both sexes is imperative to achieving a lasting and sustainable peace.

In this line, Iceland supports the extraordinary work of the International Women's Commission for a Just and Sustainable Peace, an organization where Israeli and Palestinian women work, together with women from the international community, on resolving the conflict.

It is Iceland's firm belief that the creation of a new UN gender entity to be led by an Under-Secretary General will be a very positive step towards an increased focus on gender equality and women's empowerment. Progress has been made last year on the establishment of the composite gender entity and we now have a comprehensive proposal addressing many of the concerns raised. We need to use this momentum to demonstrate our commitment to quick delivery. The gender entity should be operational without further delay.

The work for gender equality is more important than ever. It is the base for a safer, more just, more democratic, and more sustainable world we owe to our children and future generations.