

Iceland's warm gender relations

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Iceland is ranking as the world's best country as for gender equality, according to the Global Gender Gap Report, followed by Finland, Norway and Sweden. Pakistan, alas, is given the second last slot, only ahead of Yemen. I am not sure that the criteria are entirely objective, and as for Pakistan, I find its position a bit unfair. But the index is a barometer and it gives a general idea about the situation.

I am glad that Iceland ranks so high, with the other Nordic countries, including my home country of Norway. Iceland is a very small country, with only about 330,000 people living on Europe's second largest island, after UK, on the juncture of the North Atlantic and Arctic oceans. The nearest large landmass is Greenland to the north and Danish, Norwegian and Scottish islands to the southeast. Thanks to the warm current from the Mexican Gulf, Iceland has a relatively, wet and windy, climate along the coast with average temperatures above the freezing point most of the year. It is a volcanic island with hot water springs. It has many geothermal and hydroelectric power plants. There are plans underway to lay a cable from Iceland to Scotland so that the abundance of relatively cheap, renewable electricity can be exported.

Fishing and fish processing form the cornerstones of the economy in a land with one of the highest standards of living in a healthy welfare state, like the other Nordic countries, and Iceland topped the UN Human Development Index in 2007. Two years ago, Iceland was listed as number two on the quality of life index, not affected by the economic crisis that hit in 2008 when the entire banking system collapsed. The government assisted ordinary people with mortgages and prosecuted the irresponsible and high risk taking capitalists, unlike what America did. And, by the way, men take higher risks than women. Hence, in Iceland it is now mandatory that all larger companies must have at least forty percent women on their boards – and there are strict gender equality regulations for all companies with more than twenty five employees. A new gender research centre has been established in Iceland's second city, Akureyri, reminding us that in the little land, not quite everyone lives in the capital Reykjavik's metropolitan area; but two-thirds do.

Women had to take over and rescue the economy in 2008. The conservative government was voted out and the social democrats came into power, led by Johanna Sigurdardottir (the world's first openly gay prime minister). The economy was put back on track – that was also possible thanks to Iceland not being a member of the Euro Zone and the European Union. Now, Iceland has withdrawn its application for membership in EU, but it maintains close cooperation with Europe and America for trade, education, culture, and so on. More than one million visitors, mostly Europeans, visit Iceland every year.

Iceland is certainly a European country, and a Nordic country, too, which includes membership in the European and Baltic Council. Historically, it has been part of Denmark for centuries, but has had independence since 1918, with a joint monarch with Denmark as head of state till 1944 when it became an independent republic. During World War II, Iceland's neutrality was broken as it was first occupied by the United Kingdom and then the United States. During the Cold War, America had a presence in the country at the famous Keflavik Basis. Today, there is no American presence but close defense cooperation through NATO, with Iceland having been a member since 1949.

But back to the warm gender relations; how come Iceland is doing so well in that field – although it is not yet perfect? For example, only thirty to forty percent of the parliamentarians are women; the country has only had

one woman head of state, Vigdis Finbogadottir, who was president from 1980-1996. Other countries have had women heads of state and government, including Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan from 1988-1990, and 1993-1996.

Since Icelanders are fishermen (yes, most of them are men), women have had to run the home and the little farm the families have when the men are out at sea for weeks and months at a stretch. Through that, women have had to make many economic and other decisions on their own, and have become more independent through it. Since Iceland is Europe's most sparsely populated land, and communities are small, everybody counts and everybody must contribute. Women could never 'sit pretty' since Iceland was a poor land, with famine and diseases as recently as a hundred and fifty years ago.

In Iceland, everybody knows everybody and everything about each other – well, almost. That has led to people developing great tolerance and respect for each other, even those who are 'a bit different', including same sex relationships and a high percentage of children being born out of wedlock. I remember from my youth in Norway that we were quite surprised to learn that some thirty percent of children were born to unwed mothers, often were young girls who then with let their mother bring up the child so they could get on with a normal life themselves. They reason for that was to a large extent Iceland's seamen's and fishermen's culture; the men being at sea for long periods, and when they came ashore for a day or two with their fish, they would also need to relax; they met women, perhaps at dancing parties where alcohol was available, and one thing led to the other.

We should not draw hasty moralistic conclusions. Christianity has played a major role in Iceland in similar ways as in the other Nordic countries. It is only in recent decades that Icelanders, like Europeans in general, have become more secular and church attendance has declined. However, that is not an accurate indicator of religiosity and more than three-quarters of Icelanders are members of the Protestant state church, and others belong to other religious organizations. The Bishop of Iceland is Agnes Sigurdardottir, the first woman to hold this position. There are less than a thousand Muslims in Iceland organized under two umbrella organizations.

Although Iceland is a little land, on its own, it is also part of the mainstream and larger world. And that includes immigration and emigration, too. Iceland has immigrants from dozens of foreign countries, and it seems they fit in better than in other countries, whether they stay for some years or for good, or they just attend the country's largest university (with fourteen thousand students) in the capital, or another university. Many Icelanders have studied and worked abroad for some time. But there is gender in-equality in higher education since seventy percent of the graduates are now women. (But that issue I'd like to come back to in connection with the International Men's Day on 19 November!)

After the economic crisis, Iceland experienced a relatively large exodus of its own people, especially to America, the Nordic countries and the rest of Europe. But the country maintains a small population growth and demographic projections suggest that in 2060, there will be some 430,000 Icelanders. And who wouldn't like to live in Iceland, a small and wealthy land in Europe, half-way across to North America, with the best gender equality in the world? The land has economic growth, better social relations between people than most countries, and indeed peaceful and harmonious communities. Perhaps, too, the land will be discovered by more immigrants, including adventurous Pakistanis. There are already about thirty thousand immigrants and children of immigrants in Iceland. And, even in that field, there is close to gender parity. All of us can learn a few lessons from such a land.

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