

The Gender-Equal North: Icelandic Images of Femininity and Masculinity

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Abstract – This article explores the somewhat imaginary notion of the gender-equal North that signifies a crucial element of national identity in the Nordic countries. Attributes of this are various attempts to export the Nordic gender equality model. One of its trademarks is the notion of the “decent” Nordic man or the caring father, but a negative spin-off is the growing division between “us—the Nordic” and “gender-unequal immigrants.” I then focus on Iceland, where I propose a three-phase timescale based on prevalent but often contradictory gender images and correlated discourses on equality from the 1970s to the present. I name the period from 1970 to 1999 “a women’s/feminist era,” during which Iceland made some noteworthy contributions in terms of women’s empowerment that attracted international attention. I label the era from 2000 to October 2008 “the era of masculinities.” Its defining features are two conflicting images of masculinity: the caring father and the risk-taking “Business Viking.” As for the period from post-October 2008 and the economic crash to the present, it is tricky to pick a defining label. In terms of visible gender images, it is nevertheless tempting to pinpoint the nation’s most prominent figure, i.e., Iceland’s prime minister, a lesbian woman in her sixties, so maybe this could be termed an “intersectional era.”

Keywords – Nordic gender equality, Icelandic gender images

Various scholars have maintained that a general consensus about the value of “gender equality” constitutes a crucial element of national identity in the Nordic countries.¹ It has even been suggested that there is an unofficial competition going on regarding which of the Nordic countries is the most gender equal, although there is no agreement on what exactly gender equality means or how it should be put into practice.² This conflicting image construction, where gender images and their role in society are put into the forefront, is an interesting aspect to examine within this research project about

¹ Tuori, 2007: 21; Holli, Magnusson, & Rönnblom 2005: 148.

² Rönnblom 2005: 247.

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images of the North; North in my study refers to the Nordic countries. Central questions are: what characterizes the so-called Nordic gender equality, which is looked upon as some kind of role model in other parts of the world, and how does Iceland fit into that picture? And what, if any, are the negative side effects of upholding and exporting an uncritical image of the gender-equal North? A central idea to look at within this framework is the notion of the “decent” Nordic man or the caring father, which now stands as a unifying symbol for gender equality in all the Nordic countries but has, to some extent, replaced deep-rooted images of strong and independent Nordic women as prime tokens of Nordic gender equality; it signaled a shift in equality work from a strict focus on women’s rights to also emphasizing the rights of men, and men as valid subjects of equality work.³

In the second half I will look at Iceland with a sharper focus on actual gender images and examine to what extent they both shape and are shaped by Nordic gender equality discourses. I will propose a three-pronged division in Icelandic contemporary history, based on prevailing gender images and correlated discourses on equality. Hence, I have labelled the era from 1970 to 1999 a “women’s” or “feminist era,” while I have termed the period from 2000 to October 2008 “an era of masculinities,” or to use the phrasing of the *Times*, “the age of testosterone.”⁴ As for the period from post-October 2008 and the economic crash to the present, it is tricky to select a well-defined label. Salient themes in the general discussion, however, have been to blame men and excessive risk-taking masculinities for the collapse while highlighting women’s roles in the cleanup process and societal restoration. A vital example is the fact that the nation’s most prominent figure, i.e., Iceland’s prime minister, is now a lesbian woman in her sixties. Therefore, it is tempting to speculate whether the present era could be labelled as intersectional.⁵

³ It is safe to say that the focus in equality work has shifted again, this time from gender equality to broader notions of diversity, multiple discrimination, or human rights. Those changes are the subject of my PhD research, but they will not be discussed further here.

⁴ Boyes 2009.

⁵ The term *intersectionality* originates from feminist theories of how various social categories like race, ethnicity, nationality, class, disability, gender, age, sexuality, and correlated systems of oppression intersect and intra-act and mutually construct one another.

“The Nordic Countries—A Paradise for Women?”

The Nordic welfare state has been a crucial component in the construction of the image of the gender-equal north. Hence, in the 1980s the Norwegian political scientist Helga Hernes introduced the concept “women-friendly welfare states” in her analysis of Scandinavian countries and made the claim that “Nordic democracies embodied a form of state that made it possible to transform them into ‘women-friendly societies.’”⁶ In 1994 the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council published an anthology entitled *The Nordic Countries—A Paradise for Women?* The book was published in three languages, and the English version was made available at the UN Women’s Conference in Beijing in 1995. The title was meant to be somewhat ironic, as underscored by the question mark at the end.⁷ Nevertheless, the message it contained cannot be disregarded, particularly if we consider the publishers of the book and the time and place of its distribution. Accordingly, “a ‘passion for equality’ is often pointed out as a special marker of Nordic societies.”⁸ Nordic feminists have repeatedly been asked by their colleagues to evaluate if their countries are in fact the paradise for women they claim to be and whether there is indeed such a thing as a Nordic feminism.⁹

Needless to say, Nordic governments have been eager to promote such positive representations, and for decades the Nordic Council of Ministers has projected the image of “world leadership in gender equality.”¹⁰ It is important, though, to note that the Nordic boast of gender equality is not unique in the world. In a 2009 publication on gender equality, Québec’s authorities proudly declared that they were “often cited as an example of equal opportunity for both sexes on the world stage” and as a follow-up modestly asked whether “Québec really is the Mecca of gender equality others believe it to be.”¹¹ As for the Nordic countries, it has been suggested that there is an ongoing

⁶ Hernes 1987: 15.

⁷ Fougner & Larsen-Asp 1994.

⁸ Holli, Magnusson, & Rönnblom 2005: 148.

⁹ Haavind & Magnusson 2005: 227; Fehr, Jónasdóttir, & Rosenbeck 1998.

¹⁰ Magnusson, Rönnblom, & Silius 2008: 7.

¹¹ *Equal in Every Way* 2009: 57.

competition vis-à-vis which of the Nordic nations is “the most gender equal country in the world,” where the competing teams are primarily Finland, Norway and Sweden, closely followed by Denmark and Iceland.¹² The most recent forum for such a competition is the Global Gender Gap Index, which was introduced in 2006 by the World Economic Forum. It

benchmarks national gender gaps on economic, political, education and health based criteria, and provides country rankings that allow for effective comparisons across regions [...] and over time.¹³

Not surprisingly, three of the Nordic countries have topped the Global Gender Gap Index. Sweden was in the lead in 2006–2007, followed by Norway in 2008. Astonishingly, Iceland took a big leap in 2009 and again in 2010 and claimed the top spot, though it had been in fourth place in the previous indices. Finland, however, has either been in second or third place, while Denmark has tagged along as country number seven or eight on the list.¹⁴

Historically, Sweden has gone farthest in terms of declaring itself “the gender equality champion internationally.”¹⁵ In the mid-1970s equality between men and women, or *jämställdhet*, became a policy area of its own and “reflects a long history of equality as the key moral principle for Sweden” and now stands as “an allegory of Swedish modernity.”¹⁶ A breakthrough moment in that respect was the declaration of Sweden as the most gender-equal state at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. More importantly, in terms of long-term effects, was the admission of Sweden, together with Finland, to the EU in 1995. The Nordic delegations were particularly committed to pursuing gender equality measures and incorporating the notion of “gender mainstreaming” in EU documents because “the female populations of the Nordic countries were fearful that EU membership would entail the lowering of their

¹² Rönnblom 2005: 247.

¹³ *The Global Gender Gap Report* 2009: 3.

¹⁴ See *The Global Gender Gap Report* 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010.

¹⁵ Towns 2002: 157.

¹⁶ Dahl 2004: 52.

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existing gender equality standards.”¹⁷ Hence, from the onset, gender equality has been presented as a priority policy area for Swedish work within the EU.¹⁸

A salient theme in Nordic equality discourse is the notion of gender equality as a win-win situation that will benefit all, women and men alike. From the onset most gender equal legislations in the Nordic countries have been couched in gender-neutral terms, although the underlying goals are usually to improve the status of women.¹⁹ Consequently, official Nordic gender equality politics have generally “privileged harmonious and consensual ways of conceptualizing gender equality issues.”²⁰ Popular representation of this is the travel metaphor and “the cherished image of ‘the road towards’ gender equality,” which is presented as a linear process where the ultimate goal, “the gender-equal democracy,” is just around the corner. Closely connected are utility-based arguments that outline why gender equality is so important to “achieve.” Utility-oriented models, which are not uniquely Nordic, highlight the social and economic benefits of equal participation of women and men, and the many ways women will enrich the public sphere. In other words, “gender equality is transformed from a basic right to a supplementary good”²¹ and “the object of equality policies” is to facilitate “greater economic competitiveness and productivity rather than social justice per se.”²²

Another prevalent theme is the argument that gender equality is something that is already in place, as something inherently Nordic, and therefore barely political. Hence:

“Gender equality” as it is represented [...] seems to be synonymous with a certain “gender order”, typical of Finland and other Nordic countries. Equality is therefore less about

¹⁷ Squires 2007: 46.

¹⁸ Towns 2002: 162–163.

¹⁹ Hernes 1987: 16; Flóvenz 2007.

²⁰ Haavind & Magnusson 2005: 232.

²¹ Skjeie & Teigen 2005: 187–188.

²² Squires 2008: 58.

politics or anything that “should be done”. Rather, it is a claim about something “we are”.²³

Such harmonious discourses conceal the fact that there might be “conflicts of interest, either between women and men ‘in general’ or between women and men in different sectors of society.”²⁴ This construction of gender equality goes hand in hand with the neo-liberal notion of politics as commodities, not as conflicts of interests and/or groups.²⁵ In short, such views ignore the power issues at stake and the fact that equality might not always be an unlimited resource; to give a concrete example, the claim for more women MPs inevitably means that some men will have to give up their seats.

“We—the Nordic” and the “Gender-Unequal Immigrants”

Paradoxically, the notion of the gender-equal North, which has helped to produce a unifying Nordic identity, has simultaneously created divisions within states. Hence, gender equality is increasingly being used as a marker to create divisions and draw lines between “us”—“the-gender-equal-of-Nordic-ethnic-decent”—and “others”—“the-gender-unequal-immigrants.”²⁶ Ann Towns demonstrated that for the gender-equal state of Sweden in the 1990s, “gender equality became a salient terrain of differentiation” that contributed to the creation of a “hierarchical categorization of the population of Sweden into ‘Swedes’ and ‘immigrants.’”²⁷ Along the same line, feminist/post-colonialist scholars have voiced a strong critique of the Swedish gender equality model as it “neglects the discrimination against, and marginalization of immigrant women.” Further, they have criticized “feminist scholarship for ignoring the diversity of women and the intersection of gender and ethnicity.”²⁸

As for the situation in Finland, Salla Tuori analyzed

²³ Tuori 2007: 30.

²⁴ Haavind & Magnusson 2005: 232.

²⁵ Rönnblom 2005: 247–248.

²⁶ Tuori 2007; Towns 2002; Haavind & Magnusson 2005: 32

²⁷ Towns 2002: 157–158.

²⁸ Borchorst & Siim 2008: 219, citing de los Reyes et al. 2003.

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how gender equality—as an ideology and as a set of practices—is deeply embedded in the production of otherness in the Finnish context. [...] [since] “advanced gender equality” is often described as something inherently *Finnish* [...] [which] is seen to stem (at least partly) from the Finnish history, the agrarian and economically poor past when women and men were working side by side.²⁹

Multiculturalism, on the other hand, is “understood as an element that comes outside of Finnish society”³⁰ and hence constitutes a threat to the social order. Through equality training, “migrant women” (and some migrant men) are taught “to unlearn the supposedly more patriarchal gender order in which they live” and become “more like us”—more gender equal.³¹

Although little research has been done on the matter of gender equality versus immigration in Iceland, I confidently state that the dividing lines between “us” and “them” are not constructed around questions of gender equal/unequal identities. The main explanation for that is not the tolerant nature of Icelanders, but the makeup of the immigrant population. On 1 January 2009 the vast majority, or about 85%, of immigrants in Iceland originated from other European countries; of these, 46% came from Poland, where Catholicism is the main religion. The second-largest portion of immigrants came from countries in Asia, in particular the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam.³² Consequently, Iceland has only a small Muslim population, in contrast to the Scandinavian countries, where Muslims mostly embody the image of the unequal immigrant. Still, it should be noted that negative gendered stereotypes concerning immigrants have a strong hold in Icelandic society. Examples of this, on the feminine side, are images of Asian women as victimized and oppressed mail-order brides or prostitutes,³³ while the most popular masculine stereotype is that of the foreign (mostly eastern European) criminal and rapist.³⁴

²⁹ Tuori 2007: 22.

³⁰ Tuori 2007: 22.

³¹ Tuori 2007: 32.

³² Þórarinsdóttir et al. 2009: 23.

³³ Svavarsdóttir 2000: 77–83.

³⁴ On this see for example Tryggvadóttir 2006 and Stefánsdóttir 2007.

Gender Equality as a Nordic Commodity and an Export Model

An important element linked to the image construction of the gender-equal North is the commitment to educate other nations and export the successful Nordic equality model. Such a mentality regards gender equality as a field of expertise, or a commodity, that could and should indeed be exported. Hence, in Finland

gender equality is [...] a field in which “we” as a nation are in the forefront, and it is seen as an export commodity, something to deliver to other parts of the world, including other parts of European countries.³⁵

A more daring example of the same attitude can be seen in the following quotation from the Swedish government:

We in Sweden have come a long way in an international perspective, yes furthest in the world. We like to share our experiences; we gladly export our Swedish model of gender equality. But our first place must not let us believe that we have finished, there is a lot of work yet to be done in several areas.³⁶

A more modest demonstration of this line of thought was outlined in a sub-headline of an annual report of the Nordic Council in 2006, which stated: “Equality in the Nordic countries—a role model for other nations.”³⁷ In the same report it was stated that equality matters and environmental issues should be the main concerns of the Nordic Council and in terms of the former, two priorities were highlighted. The first is the very Nordic vision that it should be possible for fathers to attend to their children and families, and the second is an ambitious goal of implementing an action plan to fight against trafficking and sexual slavery, which perhaps constitute the most serious threat to the otherwise positive image of the gender-equal

³⁵ Tuori 2007: 22.

³⁶ See Rönnblom 2005: 247.

³⁷ *Ár endurnýjunar* [A Year of Renewal] 2006: 13.

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North, although the problem is far from being uniquely Nordic or restricted to the Nordic countries.³⁸

Iceland has only recently jumped on the bandwagon of presenting gender equality as an exportable knowledge-based commodity. A turning point in that respect was in 2007, “when gender equality became the third pillar of Iceland’s international development cooperation.”³⁹ These new emphases were put forward by Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, the minister for foreign affairs in 2007–2008, and she repeatedly highlighted gender equality and women’s empowerment worldwide as something that Icelanders should put on the agenda in international relations. She illustrated her case in a speech at the University of Reykjavík on 24 October 2007 where she discussed the role of Iceland in the international community. There she highlighted three areas where Icelanders were in the lead and had something to contribute to the wider world. The first was the control and the use of fishing grounds; the second was the utilization of sustainable resources; in particular in the field of geothermal energy; and third she mentioned

the empowerment and the use of women’s energy in Icelandic society, the high employment rate of Icelandic women over the decades, is very special; we have an important story to tell regarding equality matters, which among others covers the election of the first democratically elected female president in the world, and an interesting history of women’s political parties. In this area, as with the other two, we have an honour to keep.⁴⁰

But actions speak louder than words. A breakthrough in terms of Iceland’s interest in gender equality and women’s rights internationally was the establishment of the Gender Equality Training Program (GET Programme), which is “a cooperation project between the University of Iceland and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, as part of the government’s development cooperation efforts.” It builds on the experiences of other United Nations University programs already in place in Iceland, and a three-year pilot phase was launched in

³⁸ *Ár endurnýjunar* [A Year of Renewal] 2006: 10.

³⁹ GET Programme 2009.

⁴⁰ Gísladóttir 2007 (my translation).

December 2008; the first fellows arrived in the autumn of 2009. The main target group is professionals working for government and civil organizations in developing countries and post-conflict societies undergoing reconstruction.⁴¹ So, while Sweden and Finland have mostly geared their gender equality efforts towards other EU nations, Iceland appears to be mainly aiming towards developing and/or post-conflict countries outside of the EU, which perhaps have further to go in terms of achieving women's empowerment and gender equality. Hardly any critical discussion, however, has taken place among feminist scholars and gender equality specialists as to whether the Icelandic equality model of relatively high fertility rates and high workforce participation of both women and men, coupled with fairly low numbers of women in power positions—i.e., in the parliament, in local governments, and in the business sector—is really worth exporting.

The “Decent” Man—A Token of the Gender-Equal North

A vital component in the Nordic gender equality recipe is the emphasis on the alleged balance between work and family life. Resulting policies relate to fairly long paid parental leave and state-subsidized child care, which have enabled women's full participation in the labour market and men's active involvement in caring for children and families. Indeed, one of the trademarks of Nordic gender equality is the involvement of men in gender equality discourses and the image of the “decent” Nordic man. This construction has to some extent replaced “age-old ideas about Icelandic [Nordic] women's strength and liberty,”⁴² which can be traced back to origin stories about the Viking times, where “women's strength and innovation [was] explained by legacies of generations of hard working farmers' wives [...] left alone for long periods of time while men were travelling,”⁴³ or more recent Icelandic tales of “women in fishing communities of the North Atlantic” whose independence and strength was seen to derive from their participation in production and

⁴¹ GET Programme 2009.

⁴² Björnsdóttir 1996: 107.

⁴³ Dahl 2004: 107.

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the fact that they took care of the household while their husbands were away fishing.⁴⁴

In 1995 the Nordic Council of Ministers launched the first Nordic conference on men and gender equality. The event attracted about 500 people, 75% of whom were men, and they discussed diverse themes, such as men and family life, men's role as fathers, men and sexuality, and men and violence.⁴⁵ As a follow-up, the Nordic Council of Ministers issued a press release where they emphasized that the role of men in equality work should be placed on the agenda of the UN's women's commission, which was to be held in Beijing later that year.⁴⁶ Additionally, a plan of action on men and gender equality was included in the Nordic cooperation equality program for 1995–2000,⁴⁷ and the Nordic Council of Ministers selected “men and gender equality” as one of three main targets areas for Nordic cooperation on gender equality for the period 2001–2005.⁴⁸ At the EU level the Finnish EU presidency highlighted the important role of men in promoting gender equality by organizing a conference on Men and Gender Equality, which took place in Helsinki in 2006.⁴⁹ The spotlight was again put on men at a UN women's conference that took place in New York in March 2009, where the Nordic Council of Ministers hosted a one-day seminar entitled “The Caring Role of Men in Light of Equality Perspectives.”⁵⁰ On that occasion, Norway's equality minister, Anniken Huitfeldt, emphasized that “equality is a project for both genders” and pointed out that “positive progress has been made on male roles and men's participation in the struggle for equality in recent years,” despite the fact that “gender equality has long been associated with women and their struggle for financial independence, equal pay and freedom from repression and violence.”⁵¹

⁴⁴ Skaptadóttir 1996: 91.

⁴⁵ Dammert 1995: 12.

⁴⁶ Dammert 1995: 122–123.

⁴⁷ *Men and Gender Equality* 1998.

⁴⁸ “Nordisk likestillingssamarbeide 2001–2005” 2001.

⁴⁹ Varanka, J., Närhinen, A., & Siukola, R., eds., 2006: 11.

⁵⁰ “Widespread Interest in Nordic Gender Equality at the UN,” 2009.

⁵¹ “Nordic Call for Gender Equality at the UN,” 2009.

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A crucial ingredient of contemporary “Nordic” masculinity is the notion of the involved and caring father, which has systematically been promoted by various policies, most importantly generous parental leaves and implementation of some form of “daddy’s quota” in all of the Nordic countries.⁵² In terms of earmarked “fathers’ quotas,” Iceland took the lead with the *Act on Maternity/Paternity and Parental Leave* no. 95/2000, which came into effect in three stages from 2001 to 2003. It grants fathers, as well as mothers, a three-month independent right to maternity/paternity leave that is not transferable. Furthermore, parents have a joint entitlement to three additional months, which they can divide between themselves as desired. The official goal of the act is twofold: “to ensure children’s access to both their fathers and mothers [...] [and] to enable both women and men to co-ordinate family life and work outside the home.”⁵³ Another, and more subtle, objective was that the parental leave laws would contribute to ending discrimination within the labour market and close the gender pay gap by distributing the “cost” of childbirth more evenly between women and men.⁵⁴

Although expectations concerning equality within the labour market and closure of the gender pay gap have not been realized, the implementation of the laws have nevertheless been a success. Since it came into full effect in 2003, about 88% of fathers have taken advantage of their right to three months’ paternal leave.⁵⁵ Thus, it has been estimated, based on available statistics from the Social Insurance Administration from 2001 to 2006, that by the end of 2008 about 37,000 fathers had utilized their right to paternity leave.⁵⁶ So nowadays new fathers are supposed to want to take time off to care for their newborns, or as an Icelandic man put it, “now you are regarded as weird if you don’t use the paternity leave.”⁵⁷ An unfortunate result of this was that in 2004 the Childbirth Leave Fund

⁵² Valdimarsdóttir 2006: 17–32.

⁵³ *Act on Maternity/Paternity and Parental Leave* no. 95/2000.

⁵⁴ Valdimarsdóttir 2006: 9.

⁵⁵ Eydal & Gíslason 2008: 38.

⁵⁶ Stephensen 2009. It is important to note that 37,000 does not refer to the number of individuals but to the number of paternal leaves that have been utilized. Numerous men have had more than one child during the period in question and thus have been on paternity leave more than once.

⁵⁷ Gíslason 2008: 104.

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came close to bankruptcy, as more men with higher salaries were taking paternal leave than anyone had predicted. To secure the fund's financial viability an indexed ceiling was placed on the payments, so the amount paid during parental leave could not exceed a fixed maximum.⁵⁸

It goes without saying that such drastic changes in men's behaviour and organization of daily life have enhanced changes in attitudes. Gyða Margrét Pétursdóttir's research on the division of domestic labour and childcare between mothers and fathers demonstrated how both men and women use "the aura of gender equality" as a filter through which they verbalized their share of household tasks and childcare. Both were eager to believe that they were doing their fair share even if in reality a different picture emerged.⁵⁹ Yet Ingólfur Gíslason has pointed out that in spite of the strong entry of fathers, "the ideal of the good mother" still has a strong resonance in Icelandic culture. Consequently, "mothers who 'allow' the father to use a part of a sharable period or all of it [the extra three months' parental leave] are [...] often stigmatized."⁶⁰

To conclude on a critical note, fathers have surely been incorporated into the role of parenting, but mothers are still seen as the main caregivers, hence, as parent number one. Furthermore, representatives from women's movements have pointed out that the paternal leave law is the most expensive equality act that has ever been undertaken in Iceland.⁶¹ So instead of viewing it only as a success story, it can also be regarded as an indication of a shift in equality work, namely a shift from focusing primarily on women's rights to the rights of men, children, and families. But this move ties to a more sweeping transformation from the feminine to the masculine in Icelandic equality/gendered discourses, which will be the subject matter of the second half of the article.

⁵⁸ Eydal & Gíslason 2008: 35.

⁵⁹ Pétursdóttir 2009.

⁶⁰ Gíslason 2008: 96–97.

⁶¹ Here I am referring to open interviews with representatives from women's movements that I conducted for my doctoral dissertation in 2007 and 2008.

Gendered Iceland. A Historical Overview in Three Parts

In this section I will narrow my focus and concentrate on the relation between equality discourses and dominant gender images in Icelandic society, examining how they fit into the larger Nordic picture portrayed above. I will propose a new three-stage division in Icelandic contemporary history, based on prevalent but often contradictory images of masculinity and femininity from the 1970s to the present; special attention will be paid to the impact of feminist movements. To start the discussion, I present three snapshots, one for each era, which portray a feminist demonstration, a national celebration, and a protest rally, all of which somehow captured the essence of the gendered imagination at the time. Of course, such periodic divisions are bound to be flawed as subjective phenomena like images and mentalities rarely match up to strict timelines. The periods that I propose thus have blurred boundaries and constant overlaps.

The women's/feminist era—1970–1999

Snapshot 1—24 October 1975

Women's Day Off: About 25,000 women gathered in the centre of Reykjavík to protest and demonstrate the significance of their work contribution in society. That day about 90% of the female population in Iceland refused to work, cook, or look after children and as a result Icelandic society was brought to a standstill. So, in workplaces male bosses and other male employees had to step in and do traditional women's tasks, such as being cashiers, answering phone calls, or serving food. In addition, many husbands and boyfriends had to bring their children to work, or else stay home to take care of them.⁶²

I maintain that in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, discourses on gender equality were all about women's rights; consequently, feminist debates often played a central role in the everyday discourse, and Iceland made some noteworthy contributions in terms of women's

⁶² For more on the Women's Day Off see for example Ástgeirsdóttir 2006: 22, Rudolfsdóttir 2005.

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empowerment that attracted international attention. Hence, I label the period from 1970 to 1999 “a women’s/feminist era.” What characterized the era was the presence of strong and visible feminist movements, first the Red Stockings in the 1970s and then the Women’s Alliances in the 1980s and 1990s. By combining the two I part from Sigríður Dúna Kristmundsdóttir, who had earlier distinguished between “women’s liberation” of the 1970s and “new women’s slate” of the 1980s and 1990s.⁶³

What marked the dawn of the feminist era was a demonstration on 1 May 1970 when the Red Stockings appeared for the first time in public, marching in the Labour Day parade carrying a huge female statue with a ribbon that stated: “A human being, not a commodity.” The Red Stockings were a radical, feminist movement and their main requests were to be seen and treated as equal to men. They demanded equal pay and to enter work fields that had traditionally been monopolized by men, under the slogan that women could do anything that men could do.⁶⁴ They fought strongly against all kinds of stereotyping of women, and one of their main targets was beauty contests where women were put on stage and judged like cows. Another central issue was the right over one’s body, and women’s right to abortion was maybe the most inflammatory and controversial topic at the time. The feminist line of reasoning succeeded, however, and abortion was legalized in Iceland in 1975, the International Year of Women. Another big triumph for the Red Stockings and for Icelandic women in general was the aforementioned Women’s Day Off in 1975. When the United Nations proclaimed 1975 an International Women’s Year, Icelandic women’s organizations decided to draw attention to the ongoing struggle for women’s rights and their enormous contribution in terms of daily work. Representatives from the Red Stockings came up with the radical suggestion that women should go on strike for a day, and the idea was agreed upon after the word “strike” had been replaced with a more conservative notion of “a day off.”⁶⁵ Hence, 24 October was declared “a women’s day off.” This feminist action was the largest rally that Iceland had ever seen, and it created a new awareness about the status

⁶³ Kristmundsdóttir 1997.

⁶⁴ Kristmundsdóttir 1997: 145–151.

⁶⁵ Rudolfsdóttir 2005.

of women in society; subsequently, the parliament issued the first Equal Status Act in 1976.

The next breakthrough in terms of women's status was the election of Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, a single woman and a mother, as the president of Iceland in 1980, the first woman in the world to be elected as a president in a democratic election. Finnbogadóttir did not run the election under the banner of feminism, but nevertheless, having a woman as a president for sixteen years had a huge impact on the self-image of Icelandic women and girls.⁶⁶ A generation of young Icelanders grew up believing that presidency was a "woman's job" and, in the spirit of the Red Stockings, it was the ultimate proof that Icelandic women could take on any kind of work.

It is important to note that in terms of political representation, Icelandic women were still scoring extremely low. Hence, prior to 1983, women had never exceeded the 5% limit as members of parliament, compared to 26–34% in the other Nordic countries.⁶⁷ So from 1971 to 1983 only three out of sixty MPs were women.⁶⁸ What characterized the 1970s more generally was a drastic increase in the number of women who worked outside the home, so the Red Stockings' quest for the right to work had turned into an obligation. Women were, nevertheless, still largely responsible for doing the housework, which for most women meant that they were working a double shift. The establishment of the Women's Alliance in 1982 was to a large extent a response to these new situations.⁶⁹ They first ran for parliamentary election in 1983 and gained three seats; in addition, six women were elected from the other political parties, so the number of women MPs rose from three to nine, or 15%.⁷⁰ The party ran again for elections in 1987, 1991, and 1995, but their biggest victory was in 1987 when they got six women elected, or 10% of the votes.⁷¹ Their influences extended far beyond their actual political size, however, and the fact that they existed forced the other political parties to bring more women into politics. The Women's Alliance

⁶⁶ *Gender Equality in Iceland* 1995: 25.

⁶⁷ Ástgeirsdóttir 2006: 31.

⁶⁸ Jónsdóttir 2007: 206.

⁶⁹ Kristmundsdóttir 1997: 156.

⁷⁰ *Gender Equality in Iceland* 1995: 26.

⁷¹ Jónsdóttir 2007: 192.

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stressed the differences between the sexes, and their campaign was a massive celebration of femininity and motherhood.

During the 1980s attention was also brought to issues of violence against women. Grassroots movements were established around issues like a shelter for battered women, a crisis centre for victims of incest, and a rape ward at the general hospital. These movements worked alongside women politicians so the unspeakable things of the private world were brought into the open, and discussed in public places, including parliament. To summarize, the Women's Alliance was formally abandoned in 1998, when its members joined two other leftist parties that were being formed, i.e., *Samfylking*, or the Social Democratic Alliance, and *Vinstri græn*, or the Left Green.⁷²

In spite of the various achievements in terms of women's rights or gender equality listed above, another and somewhat more contradictory female figure came to the fore during the feminist era of the 1980s and 1990s, namely the image of the Icelandic beauty queen. In spite of the Red Stockings' protests against beauty pageants in the 1970s, the phenomenon reached new heights in the 1980s. The nation's success hit its highest point in 1985 and 1988 when two Icelandic women won the Miss World title. Needless to say, that inspired a great national pride, and the term "beauty ambassador" was invented to describe the important role that these young women played when they travelled the world as the holders of the Miss World title. Furthermore, the cliché that Icelandic women were the most beautiful women in the world now became an everyday phrase that was used to promote the country at home and abroad.⁷³ I have argued elsewhere⁷⁴ that in the 1980s and 1990s the Icelandic beauty queens took over the symbolic space previously occupied by the 19th-century Mountain Woman⁷⁵ as a central nationalistic trope, embodying the

⁷² An anonymous Icelandic referee pointed out that the establishment and success of the Icelandic women's slate, which often is regarded as a sign of strength of Icelandic women and as a symbol of the equalitarian nature of Icelandic society, could also be interpreted as a surrender or a sign of anger towards the political parties, which had systematically kept women out of official politics and the parliament. For me that is an important insight, worth holding on to.

⁷³ Þorvaldsdóttir 1998: 18–19.

⁷⁴ Þorvaldsdóttir 2001: 496.

⁷⁵ The image of the Icelandic "Mountain Woman" that was created in the 19th century serves as a central national symbol. The Mountain Woman embodied the image of

best of both the nation and the country. Hence, oddly enough, during the feminist era, a female president, women politicians, and “beauty ambassadors” all stood side by side as representatives of the nation, each highlighting different but celebrated aspects of Icelandicness and femininity.

The era of masculinities or “the age of testosterone”—2000–2008

Snapshot 2—27 August 2008

The homecoming of the Icelandic “silver boys”: Around 40,000 people gathered in the heart of Reykjavík to celebrate the return of the Icelandic men’s handball team that won the silver medal in the 2008 Olympics. Looking back, this “National festival for national heroes,”⁷⁶ where the athletes appeared on stage together with politicians from all the political parties and with much-loved singers and entertainers, somehow marked the end of an era. This momentum, when nationalized masculinity was manifested, was perhaps the last time that the Icelandic nation could celebrate and sincerely believe that we were the best in the world, as little over a month later the Icelandic economy collapsed and consequently the “Viking nation” lost its self-respect and international trust.

An interesting shift in the nation’s mentality occurred around the year 2000 with the dawn of the new millennium and the celebration of the 1,000th anniversary of Leifur Eiriksson’s voyage to North America. Simultaneously, the Icelandic government launched a new marketing effort to promote Iceland and Icelandic products abroad under the slogan *Iceland Naturally*. Key themes in the marketing campaign were an emphasis on purity and origins. That is, natural purity and purity of origin. As a result, images of Vikings and Viking culture were brought back to life and Iceland witnessed a reinvention of various Viking-related events, sights, and festivals across the country. A striking

Iceland as a mother and as a beautiful, young, and unspoiled bride. Symbolically the struggle for Iceland’s independence from the Danish monarchy was thus the struggle to set the Mountain Woman free. The Mountain Woman continues to be a central figure in the national celebration on 17 June, as she steps out and delivers a nationalistic poem. She no longer carries the weight of independence but symbolizes a continuum between Icelandic past and present, and by putting her on a pedestal Icelanders express their respect for Icelandic culture, history, and tradition.

⁷⁶ “Þjóðhátíð fyrir þjóðhetjur” [A National Festival for National Heroes] 2008.

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feature of the millennium Viking culture was a strong masculine overtone, coupled with a new mantra that was repeated over and over again, namely that Iceland and Icelanders were, or should aim to be, the best in the world. One attribute of this “mentality” was a drastic shift in dominant gender images where the feminine was set aside and the masculine put at the centre. Two highly celebrated but contradictory masculine figures became tokens of the era, that is, the aforementioned image of the caring father, which still has a strong footing in society, and the image of the risk-taking *útrásarvíkingur* or “Business Viking” who hijacked Icelandic society and drove it to ruin in the autumn of 2008.

Interestingly, equating Viking culture and masculinity does not need to be the rule. An example of this comes from Jämtland in northern Sweden, where the feminine side of a “Viking past” was highlighted when stories about “Viking women’s strength, creativity, and innovation” were used to mobilize women’s entrepreneurship and launch an EU-sponsored project called “*Söka Gammalt, Skapa Nytt*.”⁷⁷ So there, a return to their Viking heritage resulted in an attempt to empower women by recasting discourses of entrepreneurship as part of Swedish tradition and heritage. “Viking capitalism” á la the Icelanders, however, was a male endeavour.⁷⁸ The Icelandic “Business Viking” travelled the world and bought up international companies and estates on a scale that had previously been unimaginable. National leaders adored him and painstakingly praised his accomplishments both at home and abroad. An example of this was a speech given by the president of Iceland, as a part of a lecture series organized by the Icelandic Historians’ Society, at the National Museum of Iceland on 10 January 2006:

The phenomenon of overseas expansion stands as a striking achievement and a promise of a more powerful period of growth and development than we have seen to date, not only in commerce and finance but also in science and the arts: areas where thought and culture, tradition and innovation, are the prerequisites for progress.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Translates as “search the old, create the new,” Dahl 2004: 103–111.

⁷⁸ I am indebted to Bergman 2009 for this concept.

⁷⁹ Grímsson 2006: 1.

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The president then enumerated ten qualities that have contributed to Iceland's success story abroad, most of which are rooted in our culture, our society, and heritage. One of the traits listed was

the heritage [...] the Settlement and the Viking Age, which give us our models, the deep-rooted view that those who venture out into unknown territory deserve our honour, that crossing the sea and settling in a new country brings one admiration and respect.⁸⁰

Consequently, I want to suggest that during the masculine era from 2000 to 2008, the Icelandic "Business Viking," dressed in a suit, overtook the symbolic space previously occupied by Icelandic beauty queens. In other words, he was the new Mountain Woman, the central nationalistic trope of the new millennium, which embodied the best of the nation and the country.

A more negative by-product that sprang from an atmosphere which glorified hypermasculinity has been termed "the sexualization of the public sphere,"⁸¹ although it was in no way unique for Iceland or the North, but became a characteristic of an era worldwide. In the Icelandic context, women or the feminine became objectified as a selling point, and advertisements like "Miss Iceland Awaits" or "one-night stands"—to quote some infamous Icelandair ads—were examples of this.⁸² Another illustration of this "sexualization" was the sudden increase of sex clubs in Iceland, which started around 1995 but reached their peak in 2000, when twelve such clubs were operating in Iceland, mostly in the capital area. For the sake of comparison, in 2000, twelve to thirteen such places were running in Copenhagen, the old metropolis, where the population was much greater.⁸³

Yet in spite of the masculine overtone of the era, feminism was far from being dead. On the contrary, the spring of 2003 has been called the feminist spring in Iceland because of the establishment of

⁸⁰ Grímsson 2006: 6–7.

⁸¹ Magnússon 2003: 13–14.

⁸² Grétarsdóttir 2002: 391, quoting an Icelandair e-mail to subscribers of Lucky Fares, 29 Jan. 2001, and an Icelandair ad that appeared for a short while in England in 1998.

⁸³ See Atlason & Guðmundsdóttir 2008.

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the Feminist Association of Iceland, or FAI.⁸⁴ The FAI brought feminism back into public discourse, and some of the problems highlighted were: the gender pay gap and ways to close it; the need to increase the number of women in power positions; and violence against women and its treatment by the judicial system. Last but not least, they fought strongly against the overall sexualization of society, prostitution, and trafficking. Astonishingly, that was the battle that was met with the strongest opposition and often outspoken hostility.

It is suitable to end the section on the era of masculinity by examining how images of the caring father and the “Business Viking” interrelated or contradicted one another. Ólafur Þ. Stephensen, a former editor-in-chief at *Morgunblaðið*, Iceland’s biggest newspaper, mixed the two in a speech at the Gender Equality Forum on 16 January 2009: the title of his talk was, “Can Business Vikings Change Diapers?”⁸⁵ There he pointed out that since the parental leave came into full effect in 2003, over 85% of fathers have taken advantage of their three months’ leave. He posed the compelling question of whether the infamous “Business Vikings” perhaps counted for the 15% who did not utilize their entitlement, because they were too busy doing their risk-taking and making excessive investments to allow themselves the luxury of taking three months off to care for their offspring. Stephensen asserted that although officially all new parents were entitled to parental leave, regardless of their status within companies, there was “an understanding” that key players in prosperous firms were not expected to go on leave for three months to attend to a newborn.⁸⁶ Of course, there were some noteworthy exceptions: one of them was when a bank manager and a leading figure in “the Icelandic expansion” went on paternity leave for three months in 2003. By doing so he presented a dual image, that of a cutting-edge businessman and a family-oriented, caring father, and through the latter he obtained admiration and goodwill from the nation.

⁸⁴ Einarsdóttir 2003.

⁸⁵ Stephensen 2009.

⁸⁶ Stephensen 2009.

Post-October 2008 or the economic collapse

Snapshot 3—20 January 2009

The Saucepan Revolution: It started at noon on an ordinary Tuesday when MPs returned after Christmas break, and it lasted into the night, when a bonfire was lit, and for several days and nights to come. The Icelandic public had gathered in front of the parliament house to protest the financial meltdown and demand the resignation of the Icelandic government and the National Bank's CEO. The crowd created a cacophony with everything from pots and pans to whistles and musical instruments and, backed up by the beats of drums and kitchen gadgets, people shouted "*vanhaf ríkisstjórn*" or "incompetent government."⁸⁷

The era of masculinities or "the age of testosterone" came to a drastic end in October 2008 with the bankruptcy of three of Iceland's major banks and a subsequent economic collapse. In the immediate aftermath foreign media underlined the active role of Icelandic women in "cleaning up the men's mess" both in terms of business and politics.⁸⁸ An indication of this was the establishment of a Facebook group called "Women's Emergency Board" in October 2008. The group was politically active for several months and highly visible in the "saucepan revolution," but it slowly faded away in the spring of 2009 after the administration had resigned and an interim centre-left coalition, lead by Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, a Social Democrat and a lesbian woman in her sixties, had taken over. Sigurðardóttir thereby became Iceland's first female prime minister and the first openly gay prime minister in the world. Interestingly, the fact that she was a lesbian had never been an issue in Iceland, and it would probably have gone unnoticed if it had not been for the attention of the foreign press. As for the alleged "active role of women," it is worth noting that in the parliamentary election that took place on 25 April 2009, where the Social Democratic Alliances and the Left Green gained majority, the number of women MPs

⁸⁷ For more on the Saucepan Revolution, see for example Jonsdottir 2009 and Bergman 2009, along with numerous blogs.

⁸⁸ Ertel 2009; see also Sunderland 2009.

reached new heights and rose from 33% to 43%; moreover, for eleven months or from October 2009 to September 2010 the government had an equal number of male and female ministers, all of which contributed to the fact that in the midst of an economic crisis, Iceland claimed the top spot at the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index in 2009.⁸⁹

Concluding Remarks

The image of the Nordic countries as “the most gender-equal countries in the world” has strong resonance both inside and outside the Nordic region. This collective self-image of a world leadership in gender equality has been actively promoted by authoritative bodies like the Nordic Councils of Ministers,⁹⁰ and it has been triggered by indices like the *Global Gender Gap Report*, where the Nordic countries have taken turns being in the lead. Moreover, gender equality has been presented as an export commodity, but such endeavours have taken different forms in different countries. Hence, EU members Sweden, Finland, and Denmark have mostly geared their efforts towards the other EU nations while Iceland's aim is to promote gender equality in developing and post-conflict countries. A negative side effect of the glossy equality image, however, is the fact that gender equality is increasingly being used as a marker to create divisions and draw lines inside nations, i.e., between “us”—“the Nordic”—and “the gender-unequal immigrants,” although such lines vary between countries due to different immigrant populations. A common denominator of Nordic gender equality, however, is the image of the “decent Nordic man” and/or “the caring father” that has been actively promoted by various policies, most importantly generous parental leave policies in all the Nordic countries. In that respect Iceland took the lead in 2003 with a three-month, non-transferable daddy's quota, which for many symbolized Iceland's greatest success in equality work.

As for Icelandic gender images, I proposed a three-layered periodic division based on prevalent but often contradictory images of masculinity and femininity. I labelled the era from 1970 to 1999 a

⁸⁹ “Kynjabilið minnst á Íslandi” [Gender Gap Narrowest in Iceland] 2009.

⁹⁰ Magnusson, Rönnblom, & Silius 2008.

women's/feminist era; one of its defining features was the presence of strong and active feminist movements. Some great achievements were made in terms of women's rights at the time, although the notion of being a gender equality champion had not emerged. I termed the era from 2000 to October 2008 "an era of masculinities." During that time, two masculine images played a central role. The former was the image of the caring father, which I maintain still has a strong resonance in how we are as a nation. The second image of the flamboyant "Business Viking," however, collapsed with the economic meltdown along with the Icelandic banking system and the national economy. The current period, which I labelled "the post-economic collapse" or more optimistically "an intersectional era," marked the end of "Viking capitalism." Bold statements were made in the aftermath of the economic collapse worldwide about the end of consumerism, the end of capitalism—or the "end of masculinities." Now two years after the crash, none of those forecasts are likely to come true. In Iceland, some noteworthy achievements have been made in terms of gender equality, though—in particular regarding the political representation of women. To sum up: during the women's/feminist era Iceland became the first country in the world to elect a female president; during the era of masculinity all the national leaders were men in suits. In the era post-October 2008, Iceland hit the world news for breaking records in terms of equality achievement—this time for choosing a lesbian woman in her sixties to be prime minister. Hence, one can speculate whether the economic collapse and the alleged "end of masculinity" will enhance a new approach to equality in line with recent intersectional developments in the other Nordic countries, where emphases on diversity or multiple discrimination have been replacing one-dimensional gender equality policies.

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