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## Exchange of good practices on gender equality

### **New forms of work**

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## Comments paper - Iceland

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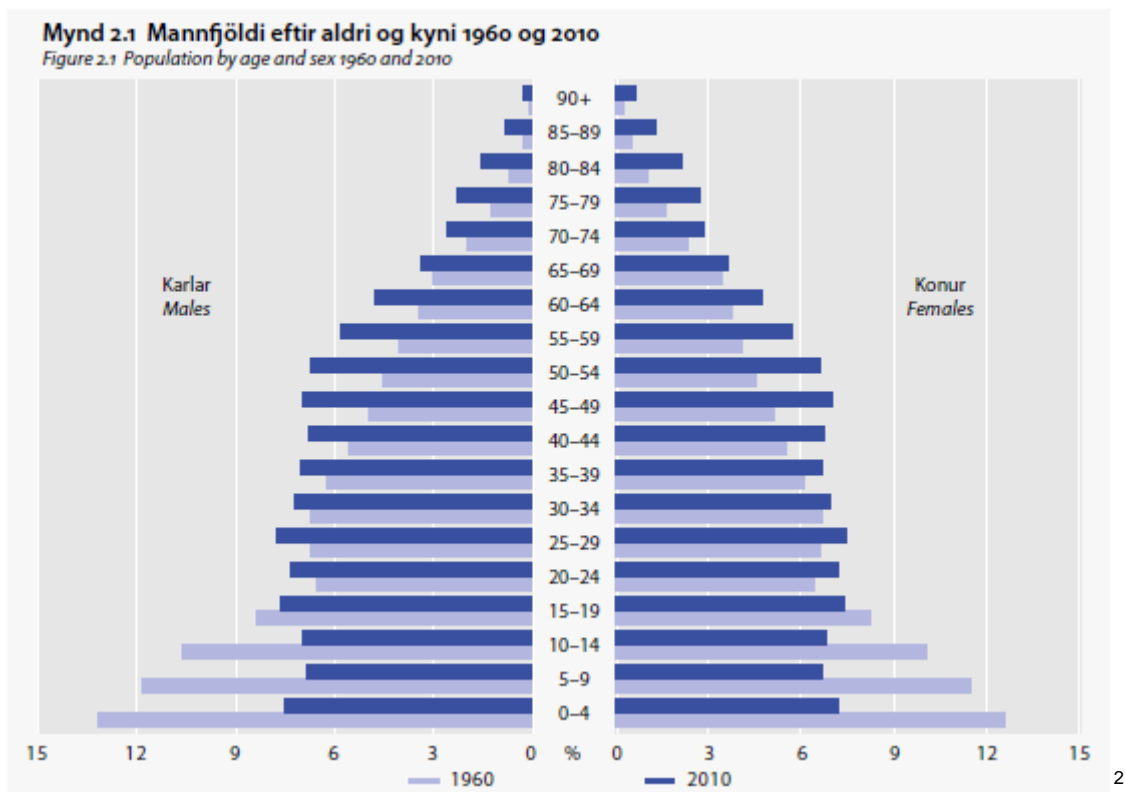
# Perspectives from the high north

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## 1. Introduction

### Population and fertility

Iceland has a small homogeneous population of almost 320.000 inhabitants. The figure shows the composition of the population by age and sex in 1960 and 2010. The fertility rate in 2009 was 2.2, above replacement level.<sup>1</sup>



### Employment rates

The female employment rate is currently extraordinarily high in Iceland at nearly 78% for the whole population; in the age group 25–54 it is just over 85%, while it is 93% for men<sup>3</sup> and the working hours of women are steadily increasing, especially for women with two or more children.<sup>4</sup> The average working hours for women in 2010 were 35

<sup>1</sup> Statistical Yearbook of Iceland, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Statistical Yearbook of Iceland, 2010: 46.

<sup>3</sup> Statistics Iceland, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Iceland, 2004: 44, table 44.

hours per week and 44 hours for men.<sup>5</sup> This is the case even though one fourth of the women work part-time.<sup>6</sup> Part-time work is defined as 1–34 hours of paid labour per week.<sup>7</sup>

## Flexibility to compromise between work and family life

Research indicates that the tension between work life and family life is particularly conspicuous in Iceland.<sup>8</sup> Work-life reconciliation strategies have been put on the political agenda, along with general equal opportunities measures. The political importance of this issue is reflected in the *Act on maternity/paternity leave and parental leave*<sup>9</sup> which allows men and women three months each – non-transferable – to care for their new born children. In addition, the parents have three months which they can divide at their own discretion (joint rights). In all, this gives Icelandic parents nine months of paid leave and in addition each parent can have eight weeks of unpaid parental leave. In 2008, 91% of fathers took a period of leave for every 100 mothers taking leave. Fathers took approximately a third of all days of leave taken by parents; on average 103 days.<sup>10</sup>

The political importance of the work-life strategies is further emphasised in the *Act on the equal status and equal rights of women and men*.<sup>11</sup> According to the law, employers are required to take the necessary measures to enable women and men to reconcile their occupational and family obligations, for example by promoting increased flexibility in organising work and working hours, and facilitating return to work after maternity/paternity/parental leave. Employers in Iceland must make systematic efforts to equalise the status of the sexes in the labour market (cf. Art. 13-16). Preparing a programme on matters of equality or including specific provisions on gender equality in personnel policy is mandatory for companies and institutions employing more than 25 people. The Icelandic authorities have furthermore approved ILO's no. 156 Workers with Family Responsibilities convention.<sup>12</sup>

## Aiming at but missing *The Golden Balance*?

In 2000 the Municipality of Reykjavík and Gallup (Research and HR company) launched a one year pilot project, *The Golden Balance* (Hid gullna jafnvaegi), funded by the EU in cooperation with three European countries. Thirty-five Icelandic workplaces participated in the project of which the aim was to facilitate a work-life balance by offering flexibility in the workplace (such as flexi-time and telework). One aspect of the project was to map the Icelandic situation concerning flexibility. A questionnaire survey carried out in 2000 and again in 2006 showed that flexibility was more accessible to men than women; to managers than regular workers; to those with higher education; to those with higher earnings, and to those working 45-54 hours a week. The survey also revealed that teleworking was used as an addition to regular hours (for 45% of respondents in 2000 and 51% in 2006) but not as a means to accommodate personal needs. Overall the survey's results indicated that flexibility

<sup>5</sup> Statistics Iceland, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Moss & Kamerman, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Statistics Iceland, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Einarsdóttir, 1998; Fridriksdóttir, 2004; Hannesdóttir, 2003; Júlíusdóttir, 1993; Pétursdóttir, 2009; Pétursdóttir, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> No. 95/2000.

<sup>10</sup> Einarsdóttir and Pétursdóttir, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> No. 10/2008, replaced 96/2000 with a comparable clause.

<sup>12</sup> The Icelandic Confederation of Labour (n.d.a).

increased work to home spill over.<sup>13</sup> A survey carried out by the Commercial Workers Union (VR) in 2011 shows that teleworking has been steadily increasing since 2004, resulting in 49% of men and 36% of women working on average about 10 hours per week from home in 2011.<sup>14</sup> Teleworkers had on average three hours more work a week, than those who did not telework.<sup>15</sup> These surveys indicate that “flexibility”, especially teleworking, increases hours spent working, despite the official aim of achieving balance between work and home.

## Economic collapse

The Icelandic banks collapsed in the autumn of 2008. As a consequence unemployment rates have risen drastically, from less than 1% for men in 2008 to 6.5% in August 2011. Women’s unemployment rates were 1.2% in 2008 and have risen to 7% in August 2011.<sup>16</sup> All public expenditure has been cut. A clause in the coalition government charter of 2007 on lengthening the maternity/paternity and joint rights leave to 12 months has been postponed. Leave payments have been lowered considerably since the economic collapse, from being 80% of regular earnings up to a ceiling of ISK535 thousand (€3.365) to being 75%-80% of regular earnings with a ceiling of only ISK300 thousand (€1.887). The State Budget for 2011 requires the Maternity/Paternity Leave Fund to cut its expenditure by ISK300 million (€1.867.646). In earlier versions of the State Budget for 2011 the Fund was supposed to cut expenditure by ISK 1000 million (€6.225.487); but since fewer parents, fathers especially, are utilising their leave (the ceiling on payments affected 46% of fathers in 2010, in 2005 before the ceiling was lowered it affected only 3%), the Directorate of Labour estimated that fathers’ use of leave will drop from 100 to 66 days, therefore requiring a smaller cut.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the ratio of fathers taking any leave dropped by 5.3% from 2009 to 2010 despite the growing number of births.<sup>18</sup>

## 2. Policy debate

Despite the conspicuous tension between work and family life in Iceland policy debate is rather scarce, with important exceptions. In 2010 The Minister of Welfare appointed a five member committee to discuss work-life balance. This was to support The Gender Equality Council whose theme that year was work-life balance following the economic crisis. The committee’s aim was to be a venue for discussions and ideas on the subject. The committee suggested that two brochures, *Keys to compromising between work and family life*, would be published; one addressing employees/young couples where demanding questions would be posed to provoke thought on the issue; the other addressing employers with questions about the company’s image and profitability. The committee also suggested that *The Golden Balance* would be re-launched by setting up a web page, rewarding companies who show important initiatives as well as devoting one week a year to the issue. The committee’s intention was to keep the issue of work-life balance alive by invoking discussions with low cost measures.<sup>19</sup> What can be learned from the Dutch example is the re-assessment procedure implemented in the

<sup>13</sup> Tómas Bjarnason (2006, 16th February).

<sup>14</sup> VR (n.d.).

<sup>15</sup> Information provided by the Commercial Workers union to the author upon request

<sup>16</sup> Directorate of labour, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Directorate of labour, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Welfare, 2011b.

<sup>19</sup> Benediktssdóttir, Pétursdóttir, Skúlason, Stephensen and Vigfúsdóttir (2011).

‘Customised working’ scheme concerning companies that are rewarded and the cooperation between the government and private consultants.<sup>20</sup>

On the Union level, The Icelandic Confederation of Labour (ASÍ) has suggested shortening the work-week<sup>21</sup>, scholars have presented similar views,<sup>22</sup> but reactions from the general public and policy makers have been lukewarm.

### 3. Transferability issues

A qualitative study conducted in 2005 and 2006 in the following workplaces: The City of Reykjavík workplaces, software firms, fast-food restaurants, a supermarket and a gas station found that a gendered division of labour prevails. The nature and organisation of women’s work is such that they have less work autonomy than men and thus less flexibility, despite shouldering the main burden of childcare and domestic duties.<sup>23</sup> What is also of importance is the proportion of female headed households in Iceland, as 15% of all households are headed by single mothers.<sup>24</sup> Men have more work autonomy and hence more flexibility, which they do not utilise due to gendered expectations, i.e. men as breadwinners or ‘ideal workers’. The gendered division of labour, and the way in which women’s work is ascribed lesser value in the public sphere affects gendered power relations in both the private sphere of the home, and the public sphere of paid labour.<sup>25</sup>

#### Intersecting variables

This brings us to an intersectional analysis to go beyond partial ‘truths’.<sup>26</sup> As pointed out in the discussion paper flexibility is not available to women to the same extent as to men (gender); it is more accessible to older workers (age); to more educated workers (class), and varies according to labour market position (class).

These issues, flexible working hours and informal care, need to be addressed simultaneously from more than one angle. Different points of departure are thus necessary to address and accommodate the various groups. One suggested point of departure is men as carers and informal caregivers. In order to change the work culture and care culture we need to change the actions of men. The current practices impose an even greater workload on women. Women shoulder the caring for children and other domestic responsibilities to a greater extent than men, therefore adding to women’s hours of paid work their overall work load will be increased.

When the bill on Maternity/Paternity Leave and Parental Leave (later Act no. 95/2000) was debated in Althing (the parliament) it was seen as a ‘one size fits all’ measure, i.e. it was thought that the act would strengthen women’s position in the labour market (career advancement, positions of power), eliminate the gender pay gap and strengthen men’s role as informal caregivers.<sup>27</sup> Research confirms that women’s position in the labour market has not strengthened and the gender pay gap has not

<sup>20</sup> Peters, 2011:5.

<sup>21</sup> The Icelandic Confederation of Labour (n.d.b)

<sup>22</sup> Gislason (n.d.).

<sup>23</sup> Pétursdóttir, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Welfare, 2011b.

<sup>25</sup> Pétursdóttir, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Weber, 2001.

<sup>27</sup> Einarsdóttir and Pétursdóttir, 2009.

been eliminated.<sup>28</sup> Before the economic crisis there were some indications that men's role as informal caregivers might have been enhanced.<sup>29</sup> The point to be emphasised is that different measures are needed to tackle different issues within different groups concerning flexible working time arrangements both in Iceland and The Netherlands.

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<sup>28</sup> Bjarnason, Ólafsson, Stefánsdóttir, Bjarkadóttir, Thorvaldsson, Thorsteinsdóttir and Margrétardóttir, 2011; Ministry of Welfare, 2011; SFR Stettarfelag i almannathjonustu, n.d.

<sup>29</sup> Eydal, 2007; Eydal and Gíslason, 2008.

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