

## **18<sup>th</sup> Nordic Soroptimist Meeting in Reykjavik 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> June 2008**

### **How can we promote gender equality and empower women?**

**Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir Minister for Foreign Affairs**

Dear Soroptimists from the Nordic and Baltic Countries,

It gives me great pleasure to speak with you today about an issue close to my heart. Gender equality and women's empowerment has been a core issue in my political approach ever since I first became engaged in politics more than 30 years ago.

As a young woman I was inspired by the Icelandic women's day off in 1975 when Icelandic women laid down their work for one day to emphasize their contribution to the economy. It raised awareness among women about the importance of solidarity, and that they could and should demand their equal share in the political sphere of power.

Another influential event was the election of Vigdís Finnbogadóttir as the first democratically elected female president in the world. In my mind, the close correlation between the women's day off in 1975 and the outcome of the presidential elections in 1980 is clear.

In 1983, I was fortunate enough to participate in the establishment of a country-wide political party called the Women's Alliance. If it hadn't been for the women's day off and the election of Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, I think we would never have found the courage to establish the party and challenge the political elite in the existing political establishment.

I am therefore convinced that role models have a significant impact when it comes to the empowerment of women. They pave the way for others and they send a very strong message: If we can do it, so can you.

The explicit purpose of the women's party was to advance women's issues and to empower women to actively participate in, and influence, political decision making.

In the 1982 municipal elections we got about 10% of the votes, and in the 1983 parliamentary elections, three women from the Alliance were elected to the Parliament. This increased the proportion of women MPs from five to 15%. In the 1997 elections, the proportion of women in Parliament had reached 30% - where, unfortunately, it still stands more or less today.

In the city council of Reykjavik, on the other hand, women have made up around 50% of the representatives since 1994.

It is safe to say that the Women's Alliance had a vast and positive impact on Icelandic politics and society. It lifted gender issues higher up on the political agenda, increased women's participation in political life and, generally speaking, empowered women to speak out within other political parties.

The party was formally disbanded in 1999. Many of the pioneers, myself included, joined other political parties where we continue to focus on gender related issues, mainstreaming, and women's empowerment.

Our work seems to have had an effect. Last year, Iceland ranked fourth out of 128 countries reviewed on the 2007 Gender Gap Index published by the World Economic Forum. One of the contributing factors has been Iceland's *Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men* that was passed by the Parliament in 2000 and revised this spring.

The Act resulted in various structural changes, creating a system that ensures the correct implementation of the Act, together with a complaints mechanism and active advocacy and capacity building in gender equality.

That same year, the *Act on Parental Leave* underwent significant changes. The leave was extended from six to nine months; whereby fathers are given three months' leave, mothers another three and the remaining three months can be divided as they wish.

Surveys now show that fathers take on average 97 days to spend with their newborn, whereas mothers use an average of 180 days. The Act has had a positive impact on levelling the status of men and women in the labour market.

As you know there remain many who doubt the importance of empowering women. To the sceptics and the critics we will always need to present hard facts. I propose this one.

In the beginning of the last century, Iceland, then under foreign rule, was one of the poorest in Europe. We received development aid until 1976. Now, thirty years later, Iceland is ranked number one on the UNDP Human Development Index.

Research shows that one of the main reasons for this dramatic turn around is the liberation of women and their invaluable contribution to our economy, with 80% of women active in the labour market.

The path towards women's emancipation has meant a lot of hard work for generations, but the advantage for society as a whole has been indisputable.

In a globalised world no country can afford not to make women's empowerment a priority. As the traditional divide between domestic policy and foreign policy evaporates before our eyes, the value of making gender equality a core issue in foreign policy becomes twofold.

Everyone needs to take part in shaping the global agenda in order to progress at home. And everyone needs to learn from the valuable experience of others.

Iceland's foreign policy emphasises respect for human rights, development co-operation and peaceful resolution of conflict. Our development policy is based on the United Nations Millennium Development Goals: poverty reduction, gender equality, sustainable development and a global partnership for development.

As we all know, gender equality and women's empowerment and participation in the development of their societies has a multiplying effect on human development. There is a clear correlation between gender equality and development!

Gender equality is therefore one of the important focus areas of Iceland's development activities. In general, gender perspectives are mainstreamed into our bilateral development co-operation programmes and projects. Our multilateral efforts also emphasise gender aspects both within the World Bank and the UN, most notably UNIFEM.

Iceland considers UNIFEM as one of its key partners. My government has been actively supporting the Fund's work, both by considerably increasing our contributions as well as by supporting its regional work in Afghanistan, the Balkans, in Africa and most recently in the Caribbean.

The most repulsive form of women's discrimination and subordination is sexual violence. With UNIFEM, we work on among other things violence prevention programmes, which I think can make a difference towards changing attitudes and contributing to ending gender based violence.

The programme clearly articulates the principles of perpetrator accountability and women's human rights. It also advances male responsibility for ending violence against women, not only individually but collectively.

I truly believe that a world free of violence against women and girls is possible but it requires broad-based partnerships, committed leadership, multi-sectoral strategies and not least the strong involvement of men and boys at every level.

In our bilateral development programmes, the focus is mostly on the poorest segment of society; illiterate women with little or no possibility of pursuing their rights. Work in the field of basic health care focuses on reproductive health and reproductive rights that also contributes to women's empowerment. We underline women's participation in the formal labour market and creating opportunities for income generating activities and entrepreneurship.

I am a feminist and I try to have the empowerment of women as the leading principle in my politics - locally, nationally and internationally. Over and over again, I listen to women eagerly denying the feminist label. They relate feminism to something aggressive and frightening for men, and they don't want to alienate themselves from their colleagues in politics or business.

But what does being a feminist mean? It means seeing the world from a certain angle; having a certain outlook on the world. It means knowing and recognizing that women are discriminated against, and it means having a strong and profound longing to see that change; to see women participate politically, economically, socially and culturally on equal footing with men based on their own merits. It means making men and women more equal and the society stronger and healthier.

I want to share with you a vision of feminism that I think is fundamentally important. Feminism is, among other things, viewing political power not as a finite sum, where you simply need to secure your share, but as an infinite source of opportunities. Power is not exclusive, it can be shared.

We all know now that formal rights do not secure equality. Women have always needed more than just formal equality. The core of feminism is harnessing politics to advance empowerment. To see political power in society as

something that grows, as engagement and participation grows, without anybody having to bear a cost. Extra participation means extra power. Politics should always mean empowerment – of people, of countries and of ideas.

Allow me to thank you again for inviting me to this meeting and giving me this opportunity to share with you my thoughts about gender equality and the empowerment of women. Sisterhood and solidarity seem to me to be the core values of Soroptimist International, women around the world truly need a global voice and I wish you all the luck in the world in the good work you are all doing.

Thank you.