



Picture by Ólafur K. Magnússon Source: *Guide to Iceland*.

## Women's Day Off: Organizing for Equal Pay in Iceland

### Vision and Motivation

On October 24, 1975, women across Iceland brought the country to a standstill. They stopped what they were doing at work and at home to protest the gender wage gap and to demonstrate the vital role women play in the functioning of Icelandic society.<sup>1</sup> Despite an Equal Pay Act adopted in 1961, which set a standard of equal remuneration for men and women doing similar work, women in the 1970s still earned 30-40% less than their male colleagues. It was time to do something about it. Called "Women's Day Off," it was the largest outdoor gathering in the country's history to date, with an estimated 90% of Icelandic women taking part. This single

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1-*Women Strike, Iceland's Men Feel the Pinch.* Montreal Gazette. October 25, 1975. <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1946&dat=19751025&id=aJMuAAAIBAJ&sjid=WKEFAAAAIBAJ&pg=2501.2435431&hl=en>

event marked a turning point for women in Iceland. During the 1970s, the number of female university graduates surged and women joined the labor force in droves. Between 1960 and 1984, the percentage of women working in Iceland more than doubled, jumping from 24% to 60%.<sup>2</sup>

Icelandic women were influenced by women's liberation groups in Western Europe and the United States who were rebelling against the status quo. In 1970, a radical new feminist organization called The Redstockings played a key role in raising awareness of various gender inequality issues. Soon after forming, the group discussed the idea of a women's strike to protest unequal wages. "The Redstockings paved the way for the future. We still owe them a debt of gratitude for daring to overthrow taboos," recalled one activist.<sup>3</sup>

International events provided the impetus for Icelandic women to act. In response to the United Nations' designation of 1975 as International Women's Year, representatives of Iceland's five largest women's groups organized a Women's Congress, held in Reykjavik in June. This was the first time Icelandic women of all ages, classes and political parties met to discuss common issues. During the Congress, a member of the Redstockings suggested "Why don't we just all go on strike?" to call attention to the importance of women's work.<sup>4</sup> After deciding to replace the word "strike" with a milder term, the Congress approved a formal motion urging women to "take a day off" on October 24, 1975.<sup>5</sup>

The Congress' decision set in motion a grassroots campaign that had far reaching consequences. "Icelandic women were not the same after the Women's Day Off," according to one activist.<sup>6</sup> Women not only succeeded in putting together the largest demonstration in Icelandic history, they also sowed the seeds for a surge in women's political participation and empowerment. The years after the protest witnessed: increasing numbers of women elected to political office, the adoption of policies and programs to address women's concerns and, over time, a reduction in the wage gap.

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2- Kaplan, Gisela. *Contemporary Western European Feminism*. New York: Routledge, 2013. p.88.

3- Valborg Bendsdottir, quoted in "Women in Red Stockings." Halla Kristin Einarsdottir. Vimeo. 2009. <https://vimeo.com/141731463>

4- "The Day the Women Went on Strike." The Guardian. 18 October, 2005. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/oct/18/gender.uk>

5- Ibid.

6- "Women in Red Stockings." Einarsdottir. 2009. Op.cit.

## Goals and Objectives

The Women's Day Off campaign had two goals: to call attention to the gender wage gap and to demonstrate the value of female labor. As a spokeswoman explained at the time, "we are not demanding any specific pay rises here. We only want to show that it is a great injustice that women receive less pay."<sup>7</sup> The idea of a women's strike, albeit couched in milder terms, was the vehicle activists used to achieve these goals. As one participant explained, "when money stops flowing, people notice."<sup>8</sup>

A committee that formed after the June Congress developed an action plan with three principle objectives: to build the broadest possible support for Women's Day Off, generate massive publicity, and maximize participation. They succeeded. On October 24, 1975, around 25,000 women, out of a total population of 220,000, left their jobs, their homes, and their children. As one activist noted, "the groundswell of support for the day made it impossible for employers to deny women's requests" to take time off.<sup>9</sup> Many banks, factories, schools, nurseries, and shops closed, unable to function without their female employees. Newspapers were not printed since most typesetters were women. Flights were canceled, unable to operate without female flight attendants. Telephone service was curtailed. Men had to handle everything, and many brought their children to work. Children's voices could be heard in the background of some television news reports. Sausages sold out at shops, bought up by men looking for easy-to-cook food for their children. Fathers were exhausted. The day was later referred to by men as "Long Friday."<sup>10</sup> Vigdis Finnbogadóttir, who became Iceland's first female president in 1980, noted: "(t)hings went back to normal the next day, but with the knowledge that women are as well as men the pillars of society. So many companies and institutions came to a halt and it showed the force and necessity of women –it completely changed the way of thinking."<sup>11</sup>

## Leadership

Organizing activities for the event started with a committee of eight female activists who wrote the Women's Day Off motion adopted by the June Congress. Joined by a member of the Redstockings, the group's first initiative was writing letters to trade unions, women's organizations, and other interest groups inviting them to appoint representatives to a larger committee that would plan activities for October 24. They also polled a number of workplaces to see whether female workers supported

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7- Gertrud Steinthorsdóttir, quoted in Kaplan, 2013. Op.cit. p.89.

8- "Women in Red Stockings." Einarsson. 2009. Op.cit.

9- "The Iceland Women's Strike, 1975." <http://libcom.org/history/iceland-women%E2%80%99s-strike-1975>

10- Kalnin, Ints. "Why Thousands of Women in Iceland Left Work Two Hours Early This Week" *The Atlantic*. 27; October, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/10/iceland-women-gender-pay-gap/505460/>; "The Day the Women Went on Strike." Op.cit.

11- Ibid.

a “day off.” The responses were strongly positive, with between 80% and 100% of the women polled favoring the idea. The organizations and groups the committee had contacted were also enthusiastic. In September, members from over fifty groups met and elected an Executive Committee of ten women. They also created five action groups: a public relations planning group, a mass media group, a finance group, a program group and a national group to focus on building support and participation outside of the capital. Finally, they chose one person to coordinate among the groups. All the women participating were volunteers and decided to forego a formal structure in order to ensure that anyone could join in when the action groups met to offer ideas and help plan activities.<sup>12</sup>



The Executive Committee, 1975. Source: Iceland Women’s History Archives.

### Civic Environment

Since gaining independence from Denmark in 1944, Iceland has been a constitutional democracy with a directly elected, largely ceremonial president, a 63 seat unicameral legislature, and an independent judiciary. The prime minister, appointed by the president, is the head of government. The country’s legislature, called the Althingi, was established circa 983 A.D. and is thought to be the world’s oldest parliament. The civic environment has long been favorable to civil society organizations and political activity of all sorts. Iceland consistently earns the highest ratings for civil and political rights as measured by Freedom House.<sup>13</sup> The media is free and independent and there is little corruption. Iceland’s 2017 score for

12- “Women in Red Stockings.” Einsrsdottir. 2009. Op.cit.

13- “Freedom in the World, Iceland.” Freedom House. Various years. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/iceland>

media freedom placed it 10th out of 180 countries according to Reporters Without Borders, and the country was 14th of 176 in Transparency International's 2016 Corruption Perception Index.<sup>14</sup>

Iceland established women's rights earlier than other European countries. In 1850, women enjoyed equal inheritance rights with men, and in 1900 they gained the right to control their income and personal property.<sup>15</sup> Women could vote and be elected to local office in 1915, but had to be over the age of 40 (men only needed to be 25). In 1920, this discriminatory age restriction was lifted.<sup>16</sup> The first formal organization of Icelandic women, the Icelandic Women's Rights Association (IwRA), was established in 1907 and continues to work on behalf women today. After a period of relative quiescence following World War II, women became more active in the 1960s, influenced by women's liberation groups, student protests, and other social movements abroad. The Redstockings' took their name from a feminist group formed in the United States. In the 1970s, membership in the five largest women's organizations totaled approximately one-third of all Icelandic women.<sup>17</sup> In the aftermath of the Women's Day Off, a vast network of civil society organizations focusing on women's rights, gender equality, and issues of gender-based violence developed.<sup>18</sup> The influence of these non-governmental organizations, combined with growing numbers of "insider allies" within Iceland's government, was instrumental in advancing gender equality goals.<sup>19</sup>



Sticker advertising Women's Day Off. Source: Iceland Women's History Archives.

14- "Corruption Perception Index, 2016." Transparency International. <https://www.transparency.org/country/ISL>; Reporters Without Borders. 2016 <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

15- "Gender Equality in Iceland." The Center for Gender Equality. 2015. [http://jafnretti.is/D10/\\_Files/GenderEquality\\_baeklingur\\_2015.pdf](http://jafnretti.is/D10/_Files/GenderEquality_baeklingur_2015.pdf)

16- "Women's Suffrage in Iceland." Kvennasögusafn Íslands. 2006. <https://kvennasogusafn.is/index.php?page=womens-suffrage>

17- Einarsdóttir, Else Mia and Gerdur Steinhorsdóttir. "The Day the Children Came to the Office." Op.cit.; <https://countryeconomy.com/demography/population/iceland?year=1970>

18- "Gender Equality in Iceland." The Center for Gender Equality. 2017. [https://www.jafnretti.is/static/files/utgefid\\_efni\\_af\\_gomlu\\_sidu/gender\\_equality\\_in\\_iceland\\_2017.pdf](https://www.jafnretti.is/static/files/utgefid_efni_af_gomlu_sidu/gender_equality_in_iceland_2017.pdf) pp.54-58.

19- Htun, Mala and Laurel Weldon. "When Do Governments Promote Women's Rights? A Framework for the Comparative Analysis of Sex Equality Policy." *Perspectives on Politics*. Vol. 8 No.1, March 2010. pp. 207-216.



Source: <http://libcom.org>

### **Message and Audience**

Activists spreading the message of equal pay for equal work targeted multiple audiences. Principal among these were: men, as husbands, fathers, employers, and citizens; employers and business owners; and, elected leaders and other government officials. Framing their message in inclusive and non-confrontational terms worked well to minimize opposition on all fronts.

In the weeks leading up to October 24, organizers planned a wide range of public relations activities and kept the mass media busy. The public relations committee circulated 47,000 copies of a letter entitled “Why a Day Off for Women?”. Female volunteers asked for and obtained the involvement of newspaper editors in publicizing the event and printing articles on gender discrimination and other women’s issues. The mass media committee sent out press releases. Radio and television programs were arranged. Twenty-five thousand “Women’s Day Off” stickers were printed and sold, and 5,000 posters urging women to stand together on October 24 and highlighting women’s work throughout history were circulated.

On October 24, news outlets around the country discussed the day’s events and radio stations broadcasted songs written especially for the occasion. Thanks to the



“Women’s Day Off,” October 24, 1975 Source: <http://libcom.org>

mass media committee’s efforts, editorials in all the morning newspapers discussed women’s role in society. A rally in downtown Reykjavik lasted for 2 hours and featured many notable speakers, including two female members of Parliament who urged women to get involved in politics. Over twenty additional rallies were held in other parts of the country. Songs, readings, and plays were performed, often sharing moving stories of individual female experiences. As one participant recalled, “we felt the power that women represent when they stand together.”<sup>20</sup> Another noted that, “there was a tremendous power in it all and a great feeling of solidarity and strength among all those women standing on the square in the sunshine.”<sup>21</sup> As for men, reality sunk in as they had to take care of everything on their own, both at home and at work. A newspaper headline put it succinctly: “Women Strike, Iceland’s Men Feel the Pinch.”<sup>22</sup>

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20- Einarsdottir, Else Mia and Gerdur Steinhorsdottir. “The Day the Children Came to the Office.” <http://kvennasogusafn.is/index.php?page=Women-s-Day-Off-1975>

21- Vigdis Finnbogadottir, quoted in “The Day Iceland’s Women Went on Strike” BBC, October 23, 2015. Op.cit.

22- “Women Strike, Iceland’s Men Feel the Pinch.” Montreal Gazette, October 25, 1975. op cit.

The Executive Committee set up several open houses in Reykjavik where women could congregate after the rally to talk, drink coffee and discuss the day's events. Volunteer entertainers went from one open house to another. In the evening, a radio program featured representatives of the Women's Day Off campaign discussing events in Reykjavik and around the country.

The Women's Day Off succeeded on a number of fronts. One year later, Iceland passed a Gender Equality Act outlawing gender discrimination in employment and education and established a Gender Equality Council to implement the law. More women entered politics and government. Vigdis Finnbogadóttir, the first female president of Iceland, attributes both her electoral success and her willingness to run for office to Women's Day Off.<sup>23</sup> In 1983, the Women's Alliance formed with the goal of presenting female candidates for political office. In 1979, only 5% of Members of Parliament were women. This increased to 15% after the first elections in which the Women's Alliance participated. By 1999, 35% of MPs were women, and the 2016 elections saw this grow to 48%, the highest proportion of female MPs in Iceland's history.<sup>24</sup> During this period, policies and laws were adopted on parental leave, violence against women, gender-based budgeting, and more.



Iceland's first female president, Vigdis Finnbogadóttir. Source: Guide to Iceland.

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23- "The Day the Women Went on Strike." The Guardian. 18 October, 2005. Op.cit.

24- "Gender Equality in Iceland. The Center for Gender Equality. 2017. Op.cit. p.24.



These political gains outstripped progress toward eliminating the gender wage gap. By 2005, the gap had barely declined, with women still earning only 65% of men's wages. To drive the point home, Icelandic women held another Day Off on October 24, 2005. Graphically reflecting the wage gap, they worked 65% of the day, leaving work at 2:08 p.m. Downtown Reykjavik was inundated with 50,000 participants, mostly women, and another 10,000 joined in other parts of the country. Similar events took place in 2010 and 2016, with equally large numbers. Organizers formed an umbrella coalition comprising more than twenty women's groups from all over Iceland. As in the past, the walk-outs enjoyed support from many trade unions, political leaders, employers, and men. A male bank manager, referring to the 2010 women's walk-out, declared his support "absolutely... it's a positive thing and it's good to remind people of the fight and to keep it on the agenda."<sup>25</sup> A father, interviewed during the 2016 protest, said he supported women's demands despite the inconvenience. When asked why, he pointed to his daughter, saying "she should get a better salary in the future like the men."<sup>26</sup>

In later years, in addition to the gender wage gap, women protested the problem of sexual violence and the small number of rape convictions relative to reported rapes. Gudrun Jonsdottir, an organizer of the Women's Day Off, called these events "empowerment at its best," adding "there is still a lot to do. It is a power we will find a way to activate."<sup>27</sup> The wage gap proved to be a stubborn problem. During the 2016 protest, women left their workplaces at 2:38pm, only 30 minutes later than in 2005. As one activist explained "people are starting to realize that this is a systemic problem we have to tackle with new methods."<sup>28</sup>

Efforts toward a new solution were, in fact, underway. The Government's 2008 Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men created new procedures to address wage discrimination. A Plan of Action on Gender Equality Regarding Wages was unveiled in October 2012 and included an equal pay standard.<sup>29</sup> Building on this groundwork, a new law came into effect in January 2018 requiring companies to prove they pay men and women equal wages for similar work.<sup>30</sup> Firms with a staff of 25 or more must provide a certificate on a regular basis showing they pay everyone performing the same roles equally, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. This is the first such law in the world. In 2017, Iceland's women

25- "Women in Iceland Take the Day Off." Iceland Review. 26 October, 2010. <https://www.icelandreview.com/news/women-iceland-take-the-day-off/>

26- Kalni, Ints. The Atlantic. 27 October 2016. Op.cit.

27- Johnson, Janet Elise. "The most feminist place in the World." The Nation. 2011. <https://www.thenation.com/article/most-feminist-place-world/>

28- Iceland Now the First Country to Enforce Equal Pay for Women and Men." BBC news. January 3, 2018. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/253d8b3e-1891-43ab-8848-4a5110bda171>

29- Ibid.

30- "Iceland Now the First Country to Enforce Equal Pay for Women and Men." BBC news. January 3, 2018. Op.cit.

earned approximately 80% of men's wages and the government's aim is to achieve equal pay for equal work by 2022.<sup>31</sup>

Over time, the success of Icelandic women's homegrown initiative had an international impact. Singling out Iceland as an example, Polish women went on strike in 2016 to protest proposed legislation criminalizing abortion. In the same year, women's groups in South Korea, Argentina, and other countries also carried out strikes. The global network "International Women's Strike" (IWS) was founded in October 2016 in response to "social, legal, political, verbal and moral violence experienced by women."<sup>32</sup> IWS planned the first international women's strike, which took place on March 8, 2017, International Women's Day. Women in more than fifty countries participated by going on strike or undertaking direct action to highlight inequality and claim their rights under the banner "Solidarity is our weapon."<sup>33</sup>

Inspiration such as this, as well as continued determination in the fight for gender equality, makes Iceland a global leader in women's rights. Between 2009 and 2016, the World Economic Forum ranked Iceland first among more than 100 countries in the world for gender equality.<sup>34</sup> While Iceland's civic and social environment has facilitated women's efforts, the country's progress toward gender equality since 1975 is due to activists' persistence and commitment to achieving concrete change. Not only did women continue to organize and build coalitions for change, they quickly and directly entered the political fray at both the national and municipal levels. Their continued determination has made gender parity a goal for Icelandic society at large, not just Icelandic women. On International Women's Day 2017, Prime Minister Bjarni Benediktsson stated "Gender equality benefits all of us. We may rank number one in the world at the moment, but the job is not done still."<sup>35</sup> Icelanders, both women and men, will continue to work toward equality with determination and serve as global leaders in the process.

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31-Ibid.; "Global Gender Gap Report, Iceland," World Economic Forum. 2016. <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2016/economies/#economy=ISL>

32- International Women's Strike. Homepage. <https://www.womenstrikeus.org>

33- <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/08/international-womens-day-political-global-strike>

34- "Global Gender Gap Report." World Economic Forum. 2016. Op.cit.

35- Bill Chappell. Iceland Plans to Become First Country Requiring Equal Pay for Women. National Public Radio. March 9, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/03/09/519438460/iceland-plans-to-become-worlds-first-country-to-require-equal-pay-for-women>

## Learn More

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