

Special Keynote Address, Icelandic Development Co-operation with UNIFEM in Small Island Developing States

Special Keynote Address

Wednesday 26 March 2008 12:30-14:00

**Icelandic Development Co-operation with UNIFEM in Small Island
Developing States**

**by Hon. Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, Minister for Foreign Affairs and
External Trade of Iceland**

Honourable Ministers, Distinguished Co-speakers, Ms. Dow, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I'm delighted to finally be here. I understand that the opening session started well without me and that you have already begun this important work.

It's my pleasure to speak with you today about an issue close to my heart. Gender equality and women's empowerment has deep roots in Icelandic society and culture. Iceland's growth in recent decades has not in the least been made possible by the advancement of women and their contributions to economic and social development.

As early as in 1908, progressive women in Reykjavik established an all-female ticket to compete in City Council elections. Other women-only political groups followed, although most were short-lived.

In 1983, I was fortunate enough to participate in the establishment of a country-wide political party called the Women's Alliance. The party's explicit purpose was to advance women's issues and to empower women to actively participate in, and influence, political decision making. In the 1983 elections, three women from the Alliance were elected to the Parliament. This increased the proportion of women from five to 15%. In the 1997 elections, the proportion of women in Parliament had reached 30%, at which it unfortunately more or less stands, ten years later.

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 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. 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.

Gender in Iceland's Development Policy

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.

In our bilateral 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.

Iceland's bilateral agency, ICEIDA, takes into consideration the needs of both genders when preparing and implementing its development projects. In 2004, ICEIDA published a gender equality policy. The policy is based on two factors: firstly, that gender equality is a human rights issue. Secondly, that equal rights opportunities and responsibilities are a prerequisite for effective development.

As we are now entering into a new relationship with SIDS, starting in the Caribbean region, let me assure you that gender aspects will be integrated into all programmes regardless of the sector.

Iceland and UNIFEM

Ladies and Gentlemen.

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. Our support, as many of you know, involves both the secondment of a Junior Professional Officer in the UNIFEM regional office in Bridgetown, as well as direct financial contributions.

I am being told that violence against women is unfortunately too common in the Caribbean. At the CSW meeting in New York last month, the Interim Executive Director of UNIFEM, Ms. Joanne Sandler, in her speech stressed that a world free of violence against women and girls is possible. It requires broad-based partnerships, committed leadership, multi-sectoral strategies and not least the strong involvement of men and boys at every level.

But big words are not enough. "Big bucks" are also needed. The programme "*Partnership for Peace*" is an exemplary violence prevention programme that we are proud to support and truly believe will make a difference towards changing attitudes and contributing to ending gender based violence in the region. The Programme is a standardised court-based batterer intervention

programme for the Caribbean developed by a Caribbean network of experts from the justice, social psychology, social work spheres. The programme clearly articulates the principles of perpetrator accountability and women's human rights to lives of security and autonomy. It also advances male responsibility for ending violence against women, not only individually but collectively. During Phase 1 of the Programme, I understand that it has been introduced to four countries in the Caribbean in collaboration with national partners, which includes governments, the judiciary and the NGO community. Iceland will be supporting phase 2 of the programme enabling UNIFEM and its partners to introduce it to 4 more Caribbean countries.

We are also proud to support the information and advocacy component of the policy-oriented research project *Child Support Poverty and Gender Equality in the Caribbean* whose aim is to reduce women's vulnerability to poverty due to their unpaid caring and nurturing work by increasing the number of men who take more emotional and financial responsibility for their children.

But it is not only the government of Iceland that contributes to UNIFEM. On International Women's day last month, UNIFEM's national committee in Iceland organised an exemplary event that raised money for the Trust Fund to End Violence against Women. Well over one million US dollars were raised and I would like to thank the main organiser and patron of UNIFEM in Iceland, Ms.

Kristin Ólafsdóttir, for her excellent co-operation and enthusiasm in promoting UNIFEM.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Allow me in conclusion to assure you that Iceland is committed to working closely with its Caribbean SIDS partners, as evidenced by our important dialogue here in the Barbados. Given my own experience, and that of my country, I believe strongly that one of the most important aspects of our development co-operation must be the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. It is truly the key to our success.

Thank you.