



**Speech
by
Halla Tómasdóttir
President of Iceland
at
Global Leaders' Meeting on Women
Beijing
13 October 2025**

Your Excellency, President Xi Jinping,
Excellencies and Distinguished Delegates,
Friends and Advocates from around the world:

It is a profound honour to address this important gathering in Beijing – a city that, thirty years ago, became the platform of a landmark moment for women's rights. In 1995, representatives from 189 countries came together with bold determination to advance gender equality. The outcome, *The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, remains one of the most progressive and transformative frameworks the international community has ever adopted for gender equality. It marked a turning point in our understanding that women's empowerment is essential to the health, peace and sustainability of every society.

This year also marks the 15th anniversary of UN Women and the 25th anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security – a recognition that peace is more durable when women help shape it.

The year 2025 also holds deep meaning for Iceland. It has been declared Women's Year – a national celebration of the 50th anniversary of the 1975 Women's Day Off, when over 90% of Icelandic women flocked to the streets and demonstrated the indispensable value of their contribution to society. That peaceful strike that took place on October 24th brought our society to a standstill – and changed the course of our nation.

It also changed my life. I was seven years old. It was my mother's birthday, but strangely she and her sisters were not baking, cleaning or serving. I asked why. Their answer was simple: “We want to show that we matter.” That moment planted a seed. I, too, wanted to matter. And I came to understand a fundamental truth about humanity: We all want to be seen, valued and heard.

Five years later, my predecessor, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, became the world's first democratically elected female president. Her leadership inspired not only political change, but a shift in our entire social landscape. In 1995, she attended the World Conference on Women here in Beijing. At the time, I was a recent college graduate, and I vividly remember the sense of momentum and hope radiating from this grand city. Let me quote President Vigdís's words from that occasion – words that ring as true today, as they did thirty years ago:

“We have come to Beijing to advance the cause of women. But even more importantly, we have come here as responsible citizens of the human race committed to creating a better world for succeeding generations.”

The Beijing Declaration has helped shape progress in legislation, education, health and representation. But today, we face serious setbacks. Rights once considered secure are being challenged – even eroded – in many parts of the world.

Progress is not guaranteed. So our gathering today is not only commemorative – it is urgent. We must revisit, reinforce and re-energise the Beijing vision. The next five years will be decisive in reaching the objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In my view, UN’s Goal 5, “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”, may well hold the key to achieving all the others.

Let me be clear: Gender equality is not a “women’s issue”. It is a fundamental human right and a strategic imperative. It drives shared prosperity, strengthens democracy, fosters innovation and enhances peace and well-being. In Iceland, we are living proof. Over the past decades, we’ve enacted universal childcare, shared parental leave, gender budgeting, equal pay certification and gender quotas – policies that aren’t perfect, but powerful. They work.

Just last year, Iceland became the first country to issue sovereign gender bonds, directing capital into projects that empower women. These are not only financial innovations – they are blueprints for resilient, future-fit societies.

Equality is not just about *who* holds power, but *how* power is shared and used. When women thrive, nations thrive. Yet even in Iceland – a global leader in gender equality and gay rights – the work is not done. Policy alone is not enough. Cultural change is critical. We need more men and boys as active participants, questioning harmful norms, sharing responsibilities and embracing inclusive leadership.

Nowhere is this more critical than in the fight against gender-based violence – offline and online. Iceland has passed new legislation to address digital aggression, but we know laws are not enough. Change must also be catalysed through education, awareness and the daily practice of respect and compassion.

Above all, progress depends on dialogue, across genders, generations and borders. Dialogue builds understanding, counters division and enables shared solutions to complex challenges.

So let us draw strength from the legacy of the Beijing platform — not as history, but as a mission. Let us act – not someday, but now – for the girls who follow us. They deserve not unfinished promises but fulfilled rights and real opportunities. And the world desperately needs their girl power!

Distinguished President Xi:

Thank you for convening this conference at such a pivotal moment. China's achievements in lifting millions out of poverty and advancing gender equality and green energy are a reminder that change is possible.

Let us carry that lesson forward. In a world marked by uncertainty, conflict and accelerating climate breakdown, gender balance is not a luxury – it is a necessity. It is the foundation for peace, the driver of innovation and the key to a liveable world.

Chairman Mao Zedong once said: “Women hold up half the sky.” Today, we must go further and add: In a world out of balance, women hold the strength to heal, the wisdom to guide and the courage to help lead the transformation we need.

Let us honour the vision of Beijing, not with words alone, but with action. Not someday, but now.