



**Speech  
by President of Iceland  
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson  
at the WAW! Conference**

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Esteemed Prime Minister of Japan,  
President of Moldova,  
Executive Director of UN Women,  
and other guests

It is a great pleasure for me to deliver the opening address at this important conference. I thank our hosts for the honour hereby shown to Iceland. The issue to be addressed here is a vital one: to seek out ways to achieve greater gender equality around the world, and hence to safeguard the human rights of all members of society, and thereby to enhance the wellbeing and welfare of the population.

I would like to share with you some stories from my home country. We are a small island nation in the middle of the Atlantic, a sovereign state of fewer than 400,000 people. Some things we do very well, others not so well. Women are, for instance, still at a disadvantage in various fields of our society – not least in the workplace and in business life. Fewer girls than boys study the sciences – STEM subjects, as they are called in English. And we still have to deal with domestic and sexual violence, of which the victims are predominantly women.

Yes, there is still work to be done. Yet in matters of gender equality we Icelanders are doing better than most other nations – or even, perhaps, better than all the others, to judge from studies and assessments carried out in recent years. In that field, we are leaders – and I hope I may be permitted to say so unapologetically, here in this hall, if only because this is why I can bring a message here which may prove helpful to others.

The truth is, ladies and gentlemen, that gender equality is not only a matter of fairness. Gender equality is not concerned solely with human rights.

Those are not the only reasons why gender equality is among the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Goal number five on that remarkable list. No, gender equality is also absolutely a matter of objective interests. Increased gender equality benefits all in society. When we all have the same opportunities and rights to show what we are capable of, society as a whole benefits. People prosper better in their working lives when domestic responsibilities are shared. Hence gender equality is also concerned with economic growth and prosperity, national competitiveness in a tough world.

This is something we in Iceland feel we know. But men and women have not, of course, always enjoyed absolute equality in Iceland. For centuries the “weaker sex,” as they were called, were subjected to oppression and injustice. When workers started to be paid for their work in money, women were paid far less than men, although they worked just as hard. Girls had less right to education than boys; and there are many more examples of inequality between the sexes in the past.

But, gradually, progress was made. In 1915 Icelandic women gained the right to vote in parliamentary elections, though initially not quite on equal terms with men. And in 1961 legislation was passed on equal pay for equal work. The year 1975 saw a symbolic landmark: a Women’s Day Off was organised, in order to demonstrate the vital role played by women in society – both in the home and on the labour market. All over Iceland, women left their workplaces and homes to gather at mass meetings where they demanded a fairer society. “But dare I, will I, can I?” sang women in a popular feminist anthem of the time. The answer was a resounding: “Yes, I dare, I can, I will!”

But women continued to be few and far between in positions of authority: as parliamentarians, government ministers, company directors and CEOs, judges and ambassadors. When I was born, 54 years ago, Iceland was still a man’s world.

Yet, matters progressed gradually in the right direction. A major step forward was taken in 1980 when the Icelandic nation elected a woman president. Vigdís Finnbogadóttir became the world’s first democratically-elected female head of state. Since then, two women have served as prime minister of Iceland, and about half the members of our parliament are now women. Women have also played a growing role as government ministers, company directors, and elsewhere in society.

These advances did not simply happen. We benefited from the efforts of women who were no longer prepared to put up with inequality. And we benefited from the contribution of forward-looking men, who grasped that in the long term, inequality hampers both women and men. And we have continued to enact laws which are conducive to gender equality in private life and in the workplace – for instance laws that provide for fathers and mothers to have equal,

and equally-divided, entitlement to a 12-month long paid parental leave. Here I also mention recent legislation on the equal status and rights of the genders, and not least laws on certification of pay equity, which is intended to outlaw gender-based discrimination on the employment market.

Ladies and gentlemen: Facts and laws tell their story about the Icelanders' clear will, and objectives that have been attained. But the story can also be told in a different way. I mentioned the election of President Vigdís in 1980. At that time it was not taken for granted that a woman could be president. And it was not a matter of course for girls to participate in sports as actively as they do today. Now the World Cup in men's football is taking place and I wish the Japanese team continued success after their splendid performance so far.

A recent Icelandic book for young readers is set in 1980 – the year that Vigdís was elected president. It tells the story of two 12-year-old girls, Ninna and Gerða, who want to go to football practice with the boys, as there are no training sessions for girls. In the novel, the coach tells them they can't train with the boys. The story reads as follows:

The coach smirked ... before he turned to ... us girls. "Go home and play, girls. You've distracted us enough."

I felt anger pumping my blood-pressure up, but I still tried to keep my voice calm as I harangued him: "Wow, you're so out of date! It's 1980 – face it! We're going to have a woman president. You can't stop girls playing football."

The coach roared with laughter. "A woman president! There will always be a man in that office."

"There's no rule about it," I snarled. I was really upset now.

But the coach was annoyed. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." ...

"Lots of people are going to vote for Vigdís," added Ninna. "She'll be our next president."

The coach smirked. "No chance ..."

"No chance," he said. He who laughs last, laughs best, as the saying goes. We elected a female president, and in football our women's team, "our girls", have had huge success internationally, just like the men's team. Admittedly, we just missed qualifying for the women's World Cup next year – but Japan's team will be there, as in all previous contests. I wish them every success!

Ladies and gentlemen. The little tale I have just told you about Ninna and Gerða and Vigdís shows how much things can change for the better in a very short time – just half a century: all that is needed is the will for change. Football history also shows us that in some fields you, the people of Japan, our kind hosts

here today, have so far achieved more than we Icelanders. In other fields, perhaps, we may be able to provide some guidance on the best way forward – the way towards greater equality, the way towards increased prosperity and wellbeing in society.

Thank you.