

United Nations  Nations Unies

the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men

including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS

Written statement*

Sharing responsibilities: Engaging the fathers. The Icelandic experience

After the rise of the New Women's Movement in Iceland in the early 1970's, sharing domestic responsibilities was one of the main issues discussed in relation to equal opportunities for women and men. Women's participation in the workforce was growing rapidly, while lack of childcare and short maternity leave was an obstacle parents were facing. Maternity leave in Iceland goes all the way back to 1945, but until the late 1980's paternal leave was not a part of the picture.

In 1960 the overall participation of women in the workforce was 34per cent, in 1971 it was up to 51per cent and 65per cent in 1981. It is now 76per cent. Over 80per cent of married women have a paid job, more and more of them working full-time. The demand for women on the labour market, women's increased education and growing awareness of injustices facing women in society, explains the strength of the women's movement in Iceland in the last 35 years.

On the 24th of October 1975 – the day of the United Nations - women in Iceland took a whole day off, or in other words went on a strike, to prove the importance of women's work for the economy. The society came to a stand-still, but that did not bring instant improvements in women's working conditions. On the contrary, women have been fighting for equal opportunities ever since, stressing among other things: bridging the gender wage-gap, equal participation of women and men in decision making and in running businesses, reconciliation of family and work and not to forget the important issue of fighting gender based violence. This implies that the voice of working women with children has been fundamental in the women's movement in Iceland.

Due to traditions and tolerance towards single motherhood, the number of single mothers is quite high in Iceland. Since the 1920's the women's movement has had the rights of single mothers on the agenda. Issues such as financial support, equal rights of children born outside wedlock and maternal rights of single women have been on the forefront of the debate. As will be explained later the development of maternity and paternal leave has always taken the interest of single mothers into account.

Different from the old Women's Right Movement, the New Women's Movement stresses that both parents are responsible for bringing up children. It was

the shaping of society and in decision-making. All the same, it took the male dominated system decades to acknowledge the need for change.

The agenda of the 1970's and 1980's stressed building-up of day-care systems, longer schooldays for children, meals in school and a longer maternity leave, later parental leave. Little by little steps were taken towards fulfilling these demands. The municipalities were made responsible for providing child-care after the child had become 18th months old, but so far most of them only offer services after the age of two.

One of the biggest steps taken towards sharing responsibilities and equality between women and men in Iceland is the fairly new and unique paternal system.

As was said before we have had laws regarding parental leave in Iceland from 1945 and they have changed a few times. The nineties were a period with much discussion about parental leave in Iceland and it was under heavy criticism on many accounts.

In the first place it was thought to be too short, at that time only 6 months. Secondly the economic compensation was very low; in fact it was below minimum wages. Thirdly there was no flexibility, you were either working or on leave, no combination was possible. Fourthly in effect only women used the parental leave. It was fairly obvious that this meant a weaker position for women in the labour market and a weaker position for men in the families. Those interested in gender equality saw this as a major challenge. And finally the rights of men and women to parental leave were vastly different depending on whether you were working in the public or the private sector, with the public sector having much better rights for women. The unions on the private market demanded similar rights for their members.

its income from a pay-roll tax so that everyone

