

# "They Say There's More Equality...": Women's Insights on Progress and Setbacks in Gender Empowerment in Northern Iceland During and Beyond the Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

Enabling gender equality through the empowerment of women to fully participate in modern society is one of the most critical steps toward sustainable development. However, recent UN reports indicate that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have jeopardized the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 5 by 2030 in many countries worldwide. While Iceland has consistently been ranked as a global leader in gender equality, research based on interviews conducted in Northern Iceland in 2022–2023, using both strength-based and deficit analyses, reveals that despite a high capacity for resilience during and after the pandemic, Icelandic women continue to encounter substantial obstacles to achieving genuine equality in the social and economic domains of gender equality.

In the social domain, despite government gender equality programs and evolving social norms, women continue to grapple with systemic issues, including traditional gender role expectations, disproportionate household and parenting responsibilities, and the internalized "super-mom" stereotype. Economically, despite Iceland's strong commitment to equal pay principles and a growing trend toward the feminization of human capital, wage and wealth disparities persist due to the enduring "glass walls." These horizontal professional barriers, characterized by segregation and clustering, are largely driven by self-selection into lower-wage, female-dominated industries, as well as employer bias and stereotypes surrounding "male" versus "female" occupations. These complex socioeconomic factors collectively shape the opportunities available to women and contribute to the hindrances to women's empowerment and leadership.

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