

Gender changes in Iceland

From rigid roles to negotiations

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Abstract

Radical changes have been taking place in the gender roles of men and women in Iceland for some decades. While they were first mainly restricted to women, the labour market and education, during the last two decades we have witnessed a change among men, mainly fathers. Taken together the changes are affecting families and the power balance within them. The changes are not unique for Iceland, similar changes have been taking place in other Nordic countries and in Europe in general, yet in some ways they have gone furthest in Iceland. In this article the changes in gender roles that have taken place in the last decades and particularly how they have affected men and the families will be evaluated and discussed.

Keywords: Gender, masculinity, parental leave, negotiations

If we look at the statistics for payments to Icelandic men on paternity leave we see a major change. In 1997 around 0.2% of those who became fathers received some economic compensation from the state for a period on parental leave. Nine years later that figure is up to 88% following a radical change in legislation. The change is easily observed in downtown Reykjavík where you see (young) males pushing the prams sometimes even two or three together, or sitting in cafés while the children sleeping outside in their prams and then bottle fed by their fathers once they wake up.

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At the same time more and more women have become visible as politicians, industrial leaders, bankers and scholars. On the whole young women today are far more educated than young men and have to a great degree taken over jobs and roles that used to be male dominated such as priests and medical doctors.

These observations are clear indications of a major change in the roles and possibilities of men and women in Iceland. While the changes in the roles of women have been underway for decades the changes among men are of more recent nature and have developed quickly. With these changes in social possibilities changes have come in ideas about masculinity, what it means to be a man, and what constitutes a real man.

The changes begin

It is almost a truism that the role of the family provider has been a main pillar in the construction of the masculine image in the 20th century, at least in western societies. Iceland was no exception and this role was even sometimes codified in laws. In 1954 for example the Icelandic parliament passed a law stipulating that a man not believed to use his wages to properly support his family could be deprived of 75% of his wages to be given to his relatives instead (Eydal, 2005, 136). The erosion of this pillar of masculinity began in the sixties when married women, mothers, entered the labour market in great numbers. Prior to that decade 35 – 40% of Icelandic women had been active on the labour market with the number of married women on the labour market usually being well under 20%. In 1960 the share of married (or cohabiting) women who were active on the Icelandic labour market was 19%. Eleven years later the percentage was up to 42.3 and in 1980 had reached 63.6% (Hagskinna 1997, 216)*. Today

* It should be noted, however, that this somewhat underestimates the participation of women on the labour market and exaggerates the change since the definition of being active was whether you had

there is no discernable difference between married (or cohabiting) and unmarried women in this regard and the percentage of women active on the labour market in 2008 was 77.7% and for men it was 87.1% (Statistics Iceland 2009a).

But this change in the sixties and the seventies obviously came with a price; a bad conscience of women, mothers. In those years even sociological books were being published which stated categorically that when a woman marries she gives up a job that she may have held and becomes the director of the home. Still, it was added that this was not a legal duty and theoretically one could imagine a reversal of the roles. But that was unlikely to happen and “unthinkable in a good marriage” (Jónsson 1965, 88). This idea of the proper role of women was even taught in elementary schools. In 1967 the state run company for publishing school books issued a book titled *Unga stúlkan og eldhússtörfin* [The young girl and kitchen work] intended to prepare young girls for their destiny as housewives. The book was re-issued in 1975 but now it was titled *Unga fólkið og eldhússtörfin* [Young people and kitchen work] and all indications that housework was more for women than men had been removed (Björnsdóttir and Þorgeirsdóttir 1967 and 1975).

When working women at that time discussed their situation the guilt seems almost tangible. The periodical *Fálkinn* ran a number of interviews with women in 1965 later reprinted in two books. One of those interviewed was a lawyer who 21 years later became Iceland’s first woman to become a judge of the Supreme Court. She had a 6 months old son when she was interviewed and was asked how she managed to combine her work and family life:

‘It works remarkably well, I think... Sometimes it is difficult but I am lucky and have a sweet girl that looks

been working a third (1960) or a fourth (1971 and 1981) of the year. We know from various sources that many married women participated in seasonal labour while not being active in the routine day to day labour. But these reservations do not change the overall picture of a very different situation for (married) women after the sixties and the seventies.

after him in the afternoon, so that I can work half-time. Besides, I work a lot at home since there is so much hustle and bustle at the office that it can be difficult to browse books, find the right place citation and so on.”

Then she was asked if she intended to abandon her praxis now that she was married and a mother:

“No, not at all. And I think that you can be just as good a mother, even though you work outside the home half-time or partly – it would not be better to hang at home and become bad-tempered and enraged” (Briem 1968, 236-237).

It is fairly obvious that the role of the mother is what mainly matters here. She is the one who has to arrange things so that the family life can run fairly smoothly in spite of her working. Her husband, the father, never enters the equation.

In September 1965 *Fálkinn* published a round table discussion of three working women on the subject of men. One was a store manager, another was a principal and the third was an actress and teacher.

In a similar vein to the lawyer cited above they felt compelled to confirm the role of the man as the main breadwinner in the family and the head of the household. The journalist asked what they thought would be the effect on the marriage if the woman earned more than the man:

“Sissa: That must never happen.

Kristin: No that would be no good. The man must always earn more than the woman.

Sissa: He must feel that he is the master of the house”
(Briem 1968, 125)

So even though women were entering the labour market they tended to see themselves as mainly mothers and housewives and second to the husband when it came to provide economically for the family. International studies have shown that when married

women, the mothers, entered the labour market they mainly entered professions that can be seen as a prolongation of traditional women's roles (teaching and caring) and provided opportunities to combine salaried work and housework by, for example, offering part time jobs (Melkas and Anker 1998). Still this was a dramatic change destined to affect deeply gender roles by, for example, providing increased opportunities for women to provide economically for themselves and their offspring, no longer being totally dependent on a man as a breadwinner.

The changes in the role of women, coupled with others such as better opportunities for family planning (the pill) naturally affected Icelandic families in many ways. For one thing the divorce rate rose sharply in the sixties and seventies, from 4.0 per 1.000 couples in 1960 to 6.2 in 1970 and 10 in 1980. After that it has remained fairly stable, fluctuating between 9.1 and 11.6 (Statistics Iceland 2009b). For another the total fertility rate diminished rapidly. In 1960 the fertility rate was 4.265, in 1970 it was down to 2.809 and in 1980 it was 2.478. And thirdly the collectivisation of child care slowly began in the seventies and eighties and developed rapidly after that. Today 82% of all children 0-5 years old are in play schools (kindergarten) with the figure for 2-5 years old being around 94%. And most of them are there a full working day or between 7-9 hours a day (Statistics Iceland 2009c).

This was also a period when more and more women sought higher education. In 1961 women were 12.5% of those receiving a university degree, in 1970/71 – 1974/75 it was 19.7% and in 1975/76 – 1979/80 it was up to 32.7% (Gíslason 1997, 12; Hagskinna 1997, 859).

The sixties and seventies then meant a serious undermining of the prior position of men as providers and heads of households, a development that has continued since then. At the same time families were getting smaller and more unstable. But what was mainly happening was that women were broadening their

possibilities in life, little or nothing similar happened among men, quite the contrary, their roles were contracting.

The parental leave

Figure 1 shows the share of Icelandic fathers receiving economic compensation while on parental leave in the period 1994 to 2006.

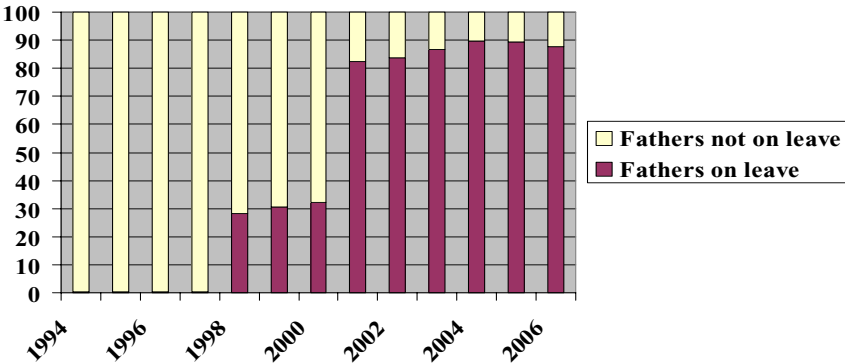


Figure 1. Icelandic fathers on parental leave (1994-2006)

From 1994 to 1997 the total leave was 6 months to a very low, flat rate financial compensation. In principle five months were dividable between the parents, in reality only around 0.3% of fathers used any part of the leave. That does not mean that they did not take leave from paid work when they became fathers. A qualitative study from that period showed that in general fathers left the labour market for 2-3 weeks following birth and the whole family was together during those weeks. But they did not use the parental leave but either used part of their summer leave or had negotiated with their employer so that they could stay at home. Some of them kept their salary during that period (Gíslason 1997).

In 1998 Icelandic fathers got independent rights to a two weeks leave immediately after birth, still to a very low economic

compensation, and about a third made use of that possibility. This figure is though slightly misleading since it only accounts for those fathers who were on the private market. Those working in the public sector simply kept their salary while on parental leave and in all probability they all made use of their right. So the numbers for the period 1998 to 2000 should be higher than presented in figure 1.

In spring 2000, the centre-right government then in office, introduced a bill on parental leave with revolutionary changes. The leave was gradually extended from six to nine months and divided between parents so that three months could only be used by the father, three by the mother and the three remaining could be divided between the parents as they liked. The months for fathers and mothers were strictly non-transferrable except if either parent died before he or she had made full use of the rights. The remaining time could then be transferred to the surviving parent. Economic compensation was now related to salary and parents receive 80% of their salary while on leave. Those outside the labour market or working less than 25% have a right to a grant. A hiring contract between an employee and employer does not change while the parent is on leave and can not be terminated during that time. The same goes for pregnant women. Parental leave is considered a part of working time in regard to several work-related rights such as raises, sick leave, pension and so on (Eydal and Gíslason 2008; Gíslason 2007).

This bill was greeted with enthusiasm in the Icelandic parliament and was passed unanimously after a very short discussion. Opinion polls have shown strong popular support for the law with 85% of respondents having a positive attitude towards fathers using their right to 3-6 months paternity leave (Gallup 2003a) and this seems to be the case among all social groups. And indeed, younger people generally show more positive attitudes with for example 98.1% of 18-30 year old agreeing in a 2005 poll with the statement that men should get paid parental

leave (Stefánsson 2008). Initial worries that employers might prove an obstacle to fathers taking leave have proven wrong.

The most comprehensive study done so far among parents who have used the new parental leave showed that 80.8% had met with a positive attitude from their employer when asking for parental leave (Jónsdóttir and Aðalsteinsson 2008). Still, there was some gender difference as 10.9% of fathers had felt very or rather negative attitudes but 4.8% of mothers (Jónsdóttir 2007, 174). Other studies have confirmed this (Arnardóttir 2008; Hákonardóttir and Jónsdóttir 2004) and of course it seems obvious that we would not have almost 90% of the fathers using their right if employers were generally opposed to it.

Icelandic fathers apparently took to the new possibilities like ducks to water. In the first year after the law took effect 82.4% of the fathers used the possibility and the numbers rose up to 86.6% in 2003 when the fathers got their third month and was 87.7% in 2006, the last year we have final figures for (since parents have 18 months to make use of their rights). As has been the case in other Nordic countries, fathers use on average the time that is allotted to them. When they had one month in 2001 they used on average 39 days, 68 days when they had two months and the average rose to 97 when the third month was introduced in 2003. In 2006 they took on average 100 days. But averages have a tendency to hide important differences. There have always been a proportion of fathers who have not made full use of even the time that only they can use, 5.1% the first year and between 18 and 19.5% since the introduction of the third month. In 2006 the number was 18.5%. But on the other hand, there have also been fathers who have made use of more than their individual right, i.e. used a part of the sharable time. In 2006 this number was 19.7% and has (slowly) grown over the years. Mothers, on the other hand, use on average 186 days, the three months allotted to them and the three sharable.

In a very short period of time we have therefore moved from a situation where the involvement of fathers in the care for their infants was negligible to a situation where it is considered abnormal not to be away on paternal leave for a number of months (Gíslason 2008). This does not mean that the father is the main caretaker while on leave but it does mean that in the great majority of cases he is highly involved. It is safe to state that never before in Iceland's history have so many men been so involved in taking care of their infants.

It should be emphasised that Icelandic fathers do not experience this as something forced upon them against their will. In 1997 the periodical *Heimsmynd* had Gallup conduct a poll among Icelandic men and asking them if they would make use of three months parental leave if it did not infringe on the possibilities of the mother. 87.5% said that they would do it wholly (60.5%) or partly (27%) (Másson 1997).

A number of studies have shown that fathers who are active in the caretaking of infants keep on being caring as the children grow up (Haas, 1992; Hook, 2006; Nepomnyaschy and Waldfogel, 2007; O'Brien et. al., 2007; Tanaka and Waldfogel, 2007). In the only study that has been done in Iceland so far in this respect, similar results were shown. Eydal (2008) compared the amount of time parents spent on care during the night and day respectively as well as participation on the labour market for parents who had their first child in 1997 on the one hand and in 2003 on the other, that is, three years before the changed laws on parental leave and three years after. The parents were asked about time use for the first three years after the birth of the child. The results were on the one hand that the gap in labour market participation was reduced between the periods as was the division of care taking. Mothers in the latter period re-entered the labour market sooner than mothers in the former and similarly there was less difference in the working hours of fathers and mothers at the end of the latter period (2006) than the former (2000). Fathers in

the latter period were much more active caretakers than fathers in the former. Furthermore the active participation of fathers in care taking was not restricted to the period of parental leave but was a continuous trend the whole period under study i.e. for the first three years in the life of the child.

Arnardóttir (2008) examined the effects of the new parental leave on the balance between parents regarding everyday tasks as well as equality between the partners. Around a third of the parents said that the balance had increased and around a fourth that equality had increased. Since the birth of a child has usually meant increased unbalance between parents this is a remarkable development. There was a statistically significant relationship between the length of parental leave used by the fathers and their agreeing with a number of statements about the effect. The longer the fathers had been on leave the more they agreed that the leave had: increased their understanding of the needs of infants; increased their enjoyment of taking care of the child; increased their emotional relationship with the child; increased their understanding of how much work it is to take care of an infant and increased their participation in the caretaking of the child after the leave was over.

It seems fairly clear from international studies that fathers in general are just as good as mothers at understanding the needs and requests of an infant particularly if they are active from the beginning (Lamb 1997). It has even been shown in international studies that caretaking affects the hormonal balance in fathers, diminishing testosterone and increasing estrogen (Berg and Wynne-Edwards 2001; Grey et al 2002; Gray, Yang and Pope 2006) and prolaktin (Fleming et al 2002; Weber 2000). This strongly supports the idea that the ability to take care of babies and young children is a common feature of human nature and not restricted to women (mothers) or more pronounced there. But, as with other talents, those who use it most become most adept.

Icelandic fathers apparently have little or no trouble taking paternity leave and the studies done so far show that on the whole they experience support and well wishing from their social network (Arnardóttir 2008; Jónsdóttir 2007). Similarly the population as a whole seems to support the system. However this should not be taken to imply that the idea of women as first and foremost mothers has disappeared or that fathers have in any way replaced mothers as the “main” parent. The fathers and the mothers are in no way on equal footing when it comes to parenting or making use of parental leave.

We still see that mothers who “allow” the father to use (some of) the sharable time are frowned upon. It seems to be regarded as a mother’s main duty to be at home with her child for as long as possible and those who do not comply with that are regarded as inferior. A small scale qualitative study was carried out among nine couples where the man had used the greater part of the parental leave (Gíslason 2005). All but one of the women reported having heard that this was not the way a good mother should behave. One of them described her experience in this way:

“Well, of course people were mainly surprised. There were a lot of questions ‘what – how did you say that you were going to do?’ and yes people commented on the short period that I was at home. I was the one who was always being criticised, what kind of a mother I was and so on... but on the other hand he got a lot of praise for being a fantastic man and of course I found this a bit hard. There was so much of it you see”.

And this is in no way unique for Iceland, similar results have been obtained both in Denmark (Olsen 2000) and Finland (Lammi-Taskula 2007). Lammi-Taskula put it well in her study of Finish parents and parental leave (2007, 147): “[Mothers] feel that in order to gain social approval and recognition, they should take the majority of the parental leave, despite the father’s readiness to share childcare responsibility by taking a longer leave period.” This

should alert us to the possibility that the reason for the skewed uptake of parental leave by fathers and mothers in the Nordic countries, where mothers on the whole take the lions share of a sharable parental leave, has perhaps less to do with the labour market situation of men and women or the lack of interest among fathers and more to do with the wish of mothers, backed up (or pressed) by popular opinion regarding the proper behaviour of mothers. Icelandic studies show that the idea of the “all-good” mother are very strong (Rúðólfsdóttir 2000) and obviously put a great deal of pressure on parents to behave in accordance with this idea.

Icelandic family legislation has changed in order to both accommodate and encourage these changes in gender roles and gender relations. Prior to and simultaneously with the increased possibilities for fathers to take parental leave there has been a development where more and more divorced couples decide to have shared custody over their child or children. This possibility was first introduced into Icelandic laws in 1992. It immediately became popular and already in 1995 a third of divorced couples chose shared custody. In 2006 this figure was up to 72.5%. In that year the Icelandic parliament changed the law so parents now automatically have shared custody after divorce unless one of them (or both) wants the custody to be with either the father or the mother.

What shared custody after divorce means in praxis, in the actual behaviour of parents, is difficult to interpret. As it is still not possible in Iceland to have more than one lawful domicile it always has to be decided where the child’s lawful domicile is to be after divorce, with the mother or with the father, even though the custody is shared. In the great majority of cases the legal domicile is with the mother who then has the legal status of a single parent and the rights and benefits that go with it. And if we look at the development of the gender composition of single parents we see that there have been practically no changes there since the sixties.

In 1965 single fathers were 7% of all single parents and in 2000 the number was up to 7.3% (Hagskinna; Statistics Iceland 2009d). However, we might be on the brink of a change. In 2005 the percentage of single fathers was 7.5% but has risen steadily since then and in 2008 up to 8.7% (Statistics Iceland 2009d).

It seems safe to assume that even though custody is shared, the mother is the main care giving parent in the great majority of cases. But it also seems safe to assume that divorced fathers are today much more active in the care giving role than they were a few years ago and this is brought out in studies (Júlíusdóttir and Sigurðardóttir 2000). For example a recent study concluded that in the capital of Iceland (Reykjavík) in around a quarter of cases where divorced parents have shared custody the children live equally with their father and mother, usually on a weekly basis (Félags- og tryggingamálaráðuneytið 2009).

Housework

Nordic studies have revealed an increase in the participation of men in household tasks in the latter half of the 20th century so that in Denmark, Norway and Sweden husbands now perform around 40% of the household tasks (Lausten, Mette and Karen Sjørup 2003; Statistiska centralbyrån, 2003; Vaage, Odd Frank, 2002). Iceland has not had a similar time study but a quantitative study asking participants directly about the division came to the conclusion that on average Icelandic men did around 40% of the household tasks (Arnardóttir 2008). It is also noteworthy that (at least for Denmark, Norway and Sweden) when the hours of paid and unpaid labour are added up for men and women, they are working similarly long hours. An Icelandic study showed that people regarded that as fair, those who worked less hours on the labour market should do more in the home (Gallup 2003b).

So what we saw in the latter part of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st was a major change in traditional gender roles. Married women entering the labour market in great numbers, a veritable revolution in the education of women and at the same time (or lagging a bit behind) a steadily increasing participation of men, fathers, in family life and child care. This has in all probability meant an alteration of the balance of power within the family sphere, first by the increased economic independence of women and then by the increased independence and initiative of fathers in family life.

Family negotiations

A noteworthy change has been emerging in qualitative studies on family life in Iceland (Atlason 2006; Gíslason 2005; Gíslason and Ólafsson 2005). Generally speaking it appears that couples are actually sitting down at the kitchen table to negotiate about the division of labour. Mostly this centres around the division of the domestic chores, but instances also show up where the negotiations are about where the couple should live and which should shoulder more of the paid work and which more of the domestic work. It appears that it is mainly dissatisfied women who initiate these negotiations but what is highly interesting is that they seem to be very little restricted by former conventions regarding masculinity and femininity.

If we begin by dipping into a study that sought to explain why the rural areas are being depopulated by the women moving away in greater numbers than men we noticed an interesting change. One of our interviewees was a 73 years old woman who had moved from the capital to a town on the east coast shortly after her marriage because her husband got a job there. She stated: *"I was of course married to my man and I just go with him"* (Gíslason and Ólafsson 2005, 154). She also said that later she herself got a job in

that town but that was more to have something to do, the salary was relatively unimportant.

Apparently this view regarding the proper role of wives has changed drastically. Now it seems to be more the case that couples discuss and negotiate their dwellings on a relatively equal basis. A 28 year old woman living and working in a small town in north-west Iceland was, when we interviewed her, very pleased that her husband had finally found a job there. They were both well educated and had moved to this town from Copenhagen in Denmark because she got a job there. When asked about that decision she stated: *"We had sort of a contract between us so that whoever first found a job, we would move there. And the other one would simply have to accept that and find some other work"* (Gíslason and Ólafsson 2005, 153).

Another woman, 35 years old, had moved with her family to a town in the west part of Iceland because she got an interesting job there. The locals were somewhat sceptical. The woman said: *"You constantly get the question... 'what? but what about your husband, what job did he get?" I often got that question. And I just said: "He just comes with me. What has that got to do with it?"*" (Gíslason and Ólafsson 2005, 153).

So it seems that we have moved from a situation where the husband's job was the deciding factor when it came to decide on residence to a situation where this is something to be decided in negotiations between equal partners. But still this is regarded with surprise and scepticism by many, at least in smaller towns. That is probably not surprising since studies have shown that people there tend to be more traditional in their gender views than people in the capital area. Also the labour market outside the capital area is very restricted and there are few opportunities for highly educated people, perhaps particularly for highly educated women. But the point is that couples are no longer encumbered by the traditional view of the male breadwinner or at least to a much lesser degree than a few decades ago.

This theme of negotiations has surfaced in other studies. A qualitative study on couples where the husband had used more of the parental leave than the three months allotted to him revealed that in many cases it is the labour market situation of the mother that is the deciding factor (Gíslason 2005). If she is free-lancing, has her own firm or is highly placed in a firm then there is suddenly room for negotiations. It also emerged that this was not the only aspect of the couple's life that was decided through negotiations. The same was the case for the division of domestic tasks. One of the mothers in the study said:

“Before, we were always arguing over domestic chores, which should do what and it is as with other women... they have less tolerance for dirt than men and that was the way it was with us. But then he said: ‘Look we can stop arguing, let’s just get a cleaning lady to come here and then we can stop arguing about which should do it.’ And finally I agreed and it was wonderful and we stopped arguing. But of course there were tasks left like washing and doing the dishes... So there were the dishes and such and cleaning the table after dinner and such and cooking of course. So we divided this fairly among ourselves, I take care of the laundry and he cooks and does the dishes. I, of course tidy around and you know and it works very well and no trouble... Yes we just sat down and negotiated and as you can hear I came out very well and this works very well.

The dynamic in the changes that are taking place is obvious in this citation. She is the one who is tired of the housework or his lack of participating up to her standards and she also regards the outcome of the negotiations as very much in favour even though she also describes the division as fair. Implicit is that she was negotiating tasks away from her while he was shouldering them. If they had not come to this agreement the tasks would have

remained her responsibility or at least she would have felt it necessary to pester her husband about doing them.

A similar dynamic emerged in another study (Atlason 2006). There we could see that not only the division of labour within the home was negotiable but also who would work more outside the home and who would be more involved with the domestic side. In this study couples were interviewed (separately) on the combination of family life and participation on the labour market. When discussing recent changes in their life a woman stated:

"At that time I was far from pleased, this was not the life I had expected when I fell in love with him. I became isolated, constantly tied to the home and my social life was very little. I just made it clear that we would have to change our family life, he would have to become more active in domestic work and cut down on his paid work".

Talking about that same period her husband said:

"I am sure that I was selfish. I had a very interesting job and spent a lot of time at work and of course that affected our relationship badly. Our relationship suffered because of my long working hours".

Again we see that it is the unhappiness of the woman that is the releasing factor, the factor that instigates changes. And again we see this being channelled into negotiation which were unhampered by traditional roles. And the results of the negotiations were that he shortened his working hours and shouldered more of the domestic duties while she did the opposite, increased her paid labour and did less work in the home.

Family planning

In Iceland as in most other European countries fertility has been declining in the last decades. It reached its peak in the seventies with 4.26 children per woman. After that there was a more or less steady decline in fertility till the late nineties when (after a change in laws on parental leave which extended it from 3 to 6 months) it rose to 2.31 in 1990. After that the decline continued, reaching an all time low in 2002 where the fertility rate was only 1.93 children per woman. In that year the aforementioned changes in laws on parental leave came fully into effect and since then the fertility has been increasing slowly each year and was 2.14 in 2008, the highest in Europe.

There appears to be mainly two explanations for this. One is that the financial situation of Icelandic parents is much better after the change than before. It seems fairly obvious that this would have an impact on the decision to have a child. The other explanation is perhaps more speculative but relies on insights from European studies. It seems from studies in Austria (Buber 2002), Hungary (Oláh 2001, 2003) and Sweden (Duvander and Andersson 2004; Oláh 2001, 2003) that one of the main factors behind a woman's decision to have a second or a third child is how pleased she is with the father's participation in the care giving of the first. If his performance has been to her liking then she is prepared to have more children. If not then one is quite enough. When almost 90% of fathers make use of their right to parental leave it can not be labelled as a wild guess that they are more active in the caretaking than before. And as has also been mentioned research points in the same direction (Arnardóttir 2008; Eydal 2008).

There are other changes that can be interpreted as increased practical family orientation among men. One is that men seem to be shouldering more of the responsibility for limiting fertility. In the year 1981 461 sterilization operations were made in

Iceland, 438 of them were on women (95%). This did not begin to change until the nineties and in 2000 764 operations were made and 67% of them on women. In 2005 more men than women were sterilized and in 2007 486 operations were made, 296 on men (61%). That Icelandic men do not take lightly the fact that they could become fathers is also brought out in a study in 1996 on contraceptive use among Icelandic teenagers (Bender and Kosunen 2005). One of the results is that young males regard it as more serious than females if an unplanned pregnancy should occur. But in spite of this more males than females agree with the statement that “often it is enough to rely on being lucky.”

The changes in the family roles with more involvement of men received a certain manifestation when the laws on gender equality were changed in 2008. One of the public organs with a role in this respect is the Council for Gender Equality which has existed since 1976. Up till 2008 it was composed of representatives from the labour market on the one hand and representatives from various women’s organisations on the other. One of the changes made in 2008 was that a male dominated grass roots movement was admitted to the council. This was the *Association for Parental Equality* (Félag um foreldrajafnrétti) which has mainly organized non-custodial fathers. This is indeed recognition of the changes that are taking place in family relations and recognition of the increased role of fathers in the life of children and the importance of these changes for the situation of men and women in Iceland.

The Labour Market

Right now there are in reality no perceivable threats to the ongoing changes in gender relations. On the contrary, long-term prognoses point to a continuous development in these directions; an increased orientation among women towards the labour market and further development of family orientation among men. For one thing women are on the whole much more educated than men

as has already been pointed out. That would seem to support the idea that their position on the labour market will continue to be strong. The proportion of women receiving a university degree in Iceland was 67.5% in 2006/2007, up from 62.6% in 1996/1997 which was up from 48.9% in the years 1985/1986 -1989/1990 (Hagskinna 1997; Statistics Iceland 2009e). Secondly discussions about the development of parental leave (both in Iceland, the other Nordic countries and increasingly in Europe as a whole) have been in the direction of extending the rights and possibilities of fathers. So have official initiatives, both as regards legal changes (Norway, Sweden, though Denmark is an exception here) and publicly sponsored campaigns. All over, the official pressure is on the fathers to use more of the sharable parental leave although that pressure probably does not extend to discussions in the homes. There it is highly probable that mothers will continue to want to take the greater share of the parental leave at least while it is only nine months long. Thirdly, the last election to the Icelandic parliament, in 2009, saw a radical increase in the representation of women or from 33% of elected members to 42% and in the wake of that election a new government was formed with a woman as prime minister for the first time in Iceland's history. Fourthly, the current crisis should bring about a diminishing gender wage gap. Both because more men than women are unemployed and because excessive salaries that had become characteristic of the bubble economy mainly benefitted men and will be much rarer in the next few years. No trend towards getting women out of the labour market can be detected and as a matter of fact unemployment has for the last decade been very similar among men and women. The first years of the 21st century saw very little unemployment among Icelanders but usually slightly more among men than women. In 2003 it was 3.6% among men and 3.1% among women and in 2008 it was 3.3% among men and 2.6% among women. The sharp rise in unemployment following the bank crisis in October 2008

was at first mainly among men and there are still more men than women unemployed but the gap has been closing.

The increased participation of women on the labour market and the veritable educational revolution has led to changes in the way women think about their carrier. In 2006 *Capacent Gallup* repeated a survey that had been conducted in the mid-nineties with the aim of uncovering the mechanisms behind pay setting in different firms and public institutions and to locate the reasons behind gender wage differentials (Jónsdóttir 1995; Capacent Gallup 2006). The study was based on the one hand on payrolls in four private firms and four public institutions and on the other on questioners among all employees in these firms and public institutions and interviews with about 80 managers. What attracted most attention when the report was published was that there had been almost no change in gender wage differences. The unexplained difference had been 16% in the former study and in 2006 it was 15.7%. But still the authors stressed that obvious changes had taken place. “Managers often mentioned in the interviews that young women were different from the older, they had in many ways adopted “masculine” values, showed more initiative, wanted challenging tasks and were eager to make a carrier” (p. 10). In a similar way the effects of families on carrier aspirations had changed. The report stated (p. 10): ”In the survey in 1996 marriage and having a family had considerable effect on how interested people were in positions of authority or promotions so that having a child or children diminished the interest of women but increased the interest of men. This has changed completely so that marriage and children no longer have any effect on people’s interest in promotions and there is no difference in the interest of men and women when marriage and children have been taken into consideration”.

And, to relate to the cited discussion among working women in the sixties, in about a fifth of Icelandic households in 2006 where there is a man and a woman, the woman earns more

than the man (own calculations based on information on taxed income from Statistics Iceland).

Changes continue on the labour market even though they are very slow. We see for example that there has been a slight reduction in part-time work among women in the last few years (35% in 2008) but no changes among men (10%). But where we do see a change among men is in working hours. They have reduced their working week from 51.3 hours in 1991 to 46.2 hours in 2008. At the same time there has been a slight increase in the working hours of women or from 34.5 hours a week in 1991 to 35.8 hours in 2008. Although this has not been the subject of a study it does not seem far fetched to relate this to the increased family orientation of men, that they have been reducing their labour time in order to be more with their families.

Conclusion

It is very difficult indeed to discern any element of threat to the self of individual men as these changes have taken place. No trace of any threat to so-called “masculinity” appear in studies or in the general behaviour of Icelandic men. Quite the opposite. Fathers have embraced his possibility with eagerness and have shown that what they had been saying in opinion polls for many years was really their wish, namely to spend a greater part of their life with their family and their children. All-in all this experience supports the general idea that in late modernity people are to a much lesser degree than previously restrained by traditional ideas. It is up to individuals and partners what they want to make of their gender, what femininity and masculinity means to them, if anything.

What seems to be happening is that the changes in gender positions are being driven forward by changes in the families with the labour market lagging a bit behind. The division of domestic chores is more equal than before and there are clear potentials for

further steps in the direction of equal sharing. The increased participation of fathers in the caretaking of babies is the obvious case here. However, it seems that on the whole, the labour market lags behind. It operates as if families still only had one breadwinner, one who could devote himself completely to his work when the need arises, in the safe assurance that someone else would take care of responsibilities relating to the home and children. This simply is not the case anymore and unless the labour market is reorganized to take this fact into account we are heading for a collision which will probably lead to a losing situation for families in general.

It is time to take seriously the notion that masculinity is much less a mystical entity engraved on all men than a question of what opportunities social rules and regulations offer to men and women. We know from several studies that men are in no way worse than women as caretakers and that they want to be more involved with their children. Social rules and regulations have, on the other hand been an obstacle in their way. They still are in many ways both in Iceland and, perhaps to a greater degree, in other countries. But what we have been witnessing in Iceland is how new possibilities can be opened up for both men and women and thereby giving both a better chance to live fuller and richer lives where they are not encumbered by outdated ideas of what is the right and proper behaviour for men on the one hand and women on the other. The road to such a change is not so much blocked by the resistance of men as laws and regulations that do not grasp the potential for change. But we are also faced with a structure on the labour market that has difficulty adopting to a new family situation with two parents, both working full time. To a much too high degree the labour market is still organised on the basis of the dated situation with one housewife and one breadwinner who could be relied on to devote all his energy at work. Unless the labour market can adapt to the new situation we face a halt in the forward march of gender equality.

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