

# Feminism's Influence on Iceland's Foreign Policy

Written by Silja Bara Omarsdottir

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SILJA BARA OMARSDOTTIR, AUG 21 2012

Although gender was, at best, a marginal concern of IR, feminist scholars have brought the question of women's status, role, and participation to the forefront in the last 20 years or so. Women remain sidelined in many fields, however, and feminist perspectives and policies are rarely prominent in mainstream international relations courses and programs. Many feminist activists also feel that women's issues and concerns are window dressing at best in public and foreign policy. In this article, I suggest that in Iceland feminism has succeeded in impacting foreign policy as evidenced by the prominence of women's issues in Iceland's international involvement. I measure this with donations to UNIFEM (now UN Women). The causal explanation appears to be a confluence of the increased number of women playing a political role in the shaping of foreign policy, the increased number of women in Foreign Service, and feminist activism at home and abroad.

### Women's Participation in Icelandic Society

Feminism and women's movements have influenced the social and political arena in Iceland for a number of decades, arguably as far back as the first decade of the 20th century when the Icelandic suffrage movement made its presence felt. Their influence has varied over time, and has been quite noticeable in various issues. Foreign affairs has been slower to respond to these influences, but has of late begun to respond to pressures from numerous sources, including women in politics, women in the Foreign Service, and women in civil society.

### Women in Politics

What was initially the vision of a few individuals, mostly women, has now entered the mainstream discourse. This has happened, for example, through the increase of women in Parliament. The first woman took a seat in the Icelandic Parliament in 1922. [2] For the next 40 years there was usually one, rarely two, woman in Parliament, and often there were none. From 1956, women have always held seats in Parliament and in every election since 1971 there have been three or more women elected. A significant jump is noted in the 1983 elections, when the number of women in Parliament tripled, from three to nine (Althingi, n.d.). [3] These were the first elections the Women's Alliance participated in at the national level, and the results are quite clear. A concerted effort by women to occupy a place of power was needed for them to gain status and influence. The Women's Alliance attempted to view every issue from a gender perspective, with a foreign affairs policy emphasizing pacifism. The Women's Alliance's impact was quite noticeable in many fields in society. The least change, as noted above, could be observed in foreign policy, where the dominant perspective remained that of realism until well beyond the end of the Cold War.

In 1999 the number of women in Parliament reached an historic high at 22 out of 63. In the two subsequent elections, women's numbers in Parliament were slightly lower but in the early elections in 2009 (mid-way through the regular electoral term), women earned 27 seats, an unprecedented 43% of the seats in Parliament. Nonetheless, women's role in foreign affairs remained limited. The first woman to take a seat on the Committee on Foreign Affairs did so in 1978 and served for only one year. The next woman to follow did so in the fall of 1983, and throughout that term, or until 1987, one or no woman held a seat on the committee, but since 1988 at least two women have served on the committee. While the number of women on the committee expanded during the 1980s, it did so very slowly in the 1990s, and from 1991 to 2003, two or three women served on the committee, which is composed of nine Members of Parliament. Only in 2004 did a fourth woman enter, and to this date women have yet to become a majority in the

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committee. Two women have served as chairs of the committee, one from 2002-2003, and the other from 2003-2005. [4]

## **Women in Foreign Service**

The Icelandic Foreign Service was dominated by men until the mid 1970s. In the mid-1970s positions were openly advertised for the first time and three young people were hired from the pool of applicants. This included two women and one man. The two women went on to mark history in Icelandic public administration as one became the first Icelandic woman to become Permanent Secretary of State in 1988 and the other the first woman ambassador in 1991. [5] In their wake followed a number of women, although their climb to the higher levels of the Foreign Service has been slow. In summaries of the status of women in public decision making, published by the Council of Europe (CoE) in 2006, reflecting the status of women and men in 2005, and annual data from the Icelandic Ministry for Foreign Affairs from 2006-2009, [6] this becomes quite apparent. By 2005, three women had earned the rank of Ambassador, a total of 8.3% of ambassadors in the service. Minister Counsellors were also predominantly male, with women representing only 3, or 11% of diplomatic staff at that rank. While the number of women ambassadors has grown from three (8.3%) in 2005 to eight (20%) in 2009, the gender ratio of Minister Counsellors has remained quite consistent throughout the same time period. Meanwhile there is a near balance in the gender ratios at the rank of Counsellor and First Secretary throughout the period. Women outnumber men only at the rank of First Secretary, and only as recently as of 2006.

The increase in women's numbers in the Icelandic Foreign Service, in particular the growing number of women ambassadors, has coincided with the increased emphasis on the significance of prioritizing gender equality in development and security. Iceland funded a number of gender advisors to then UNIFEM's offices in the Balkans since 1999, in addition to intermittent funding of staff and Junior Program Officers at the same organization's headquarters in New York and in the field. The emphasis on women is for example reflected in Iceland being among the first countries to adopt a national action plan for the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, [7] which again may in part be traced to the gender training, discussed below, which the National Committee of UNIFEM in Iceland provided for Icelandic peacekeepers from 2006 onwards.

## **Civil Society and International Institutions**

The National Committee for UNIFEM (NC) in Iceland was established in December 1989, and was the first Icelandic organization focused on the status of women around the world although it built on a long tradition of activism on women's issues. At the very outset it was decided that the NC would not focus on fundraising, but rather place its efforts on encouraging the government to make significant annual contributions to UNIFEM. [8] The NC continued operating in this vein until 2006, when the Ministry for Foreign Affairs decided to direct its contribution to UNIFEM directly to headquarters in New York, rather than through the NC. This was done in cooperation with the NC, and followed by a 40% increase in the state's contribution between 2006 and 2007 (National Committee of UNIFEM in Iceland, 2007). [9] Iceland's donations to UNIFEM have increased substantially over time, [10] both when considering the total amount and the type of contributions, which were initially focused on Cost-Sharing for projects Icelandic experts were seconded to. Iceland went from contributing \$117,000 in 2001 and peaked at \$854,000 in 2008. Donations for 2010 (most recent available) equaled \$800,000, [11] despite the banking crash in Iceland, after which the ISK was in effect devalued by about 50%.

The increased contributions of Iceland throughout the first few years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century reflect a change in the values setting the foreign policy agenda in Iceland and may also relate to the emphasis the Millennium Development Goals placed on the conditions of women and girls. This change, again, occurs at the same time as women entered foreign policy making, both in climbing the ranks of the Foreign Service, growing in numbers in the Parliament, and taking control politically of the office of Minister for Foreign Affairs.

The UNIFEM National Committee in Iceland was not alone in pressing for increased attention to gender equality in Icelandic foreign policy. Considerable information on the importance of prioritizing gender equality also came from international institutions. Among these is the report compiled by Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf [12] and

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published by UNIFEM, *Women, War, Peace*. This report presents very persuasive documentation on the need to mainstream gender perspectives in the international arena. The arguments put forth in the report and promoted by the UN and various NGOs around the world found fertile ground in Iceland, where they were adopted by the National Committee of UNIFEM in Iceland and promoted in various forums.

The pressure to promote gender equality and women's agendas in Iceland's foreign policy has come from numerous sources. Policy learning seems to have taken place as the subsystems of women participating in politics, Foreign Service, and civil society have combined to bring gender equality to a much higher status in Icelandic foreign policy in 2009 than could have been imagined in 1999.

## Conclusions

This article has reviewed the confluence of women's increase in public offices, increased pressure to prioritize gender equality in Icelandic foreign policy and the Icelandic government's increased support of women's programs internationally. Ever increasing pressure on government from different directions, as indicated by the actions of the National Committee of UNIFEM in Iceland, UN Resolutions and publications, and an increase in the number of women in the Icelandic Foreign Service provides credible support for the claim that feminism has influenced Icelandic foreign policy. It is too soon, however, to assert that this is a lasting effect. While considerable emphasis has been placed on the issue over the course of the last three years, there is a general tendency to reduce attention paid to non-revenue generating issues during recessions. Assuming that increased attention to gender equality in foreign policy is a good thing, recent history gives cause for optimism.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Discussion based on Ómarsdóttir (2010). Áhrif femínisma á íslenska utanríkisstefnu 1999-2009. *Stjórnmal og stjórnsýsla*, 6(2), pp. 73-94.

<sup>[2]</sup> Althingi. (n.d.a). *Konur á Alþingi* [Women in Parliament]. <http://www.althingi.is/vefur/konur.html>

<sup>[3]</sup> Althingi. (n.d.a). *Konur á Alþingi* [Women in Parliament]. <http://www.althingi.is/vefur/konur.html>

<sup>[4]</sup> Ómarsdóttir (2010). Áhrif femínisma á íslenska utanríkisstefnu 1999-2009. *Stjórnmal og stjórnsýsla*, 6(2), pp. 73-94.

<sup>[5]</sup> Kvennasögusafn. (n.d.). *Ártöl og áfangar í sögu íslenskra kvenna* [Dates and Milestones in the History of Icelandic Women]. <http://www.kvennasogusafn.is/Kvennasaga/artol.html>

<sup>[6]</sup> Council of Europe. (2006). *Sex-disaggregated statistics on the participation of women and men in political and public decision-making in Council of Europe member states: Situation as at 1 September 2005* (CDEG (2006) 15). Strasbourg: Council of Europe. [http://www.coe.int/t/e/human\\_rights/equality/PDF\\_CDEG%282006%2915\\_E.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/equality/PDF_CDEG%282006%2915_E.pdf); Council of Europe. (2009). *Sex-disaggregated statistics on the participation of women and men in political and public decision-making in Council of Europe member states. Situation as of September 1, 2008* (CDEG (2009) 1). Strasbourg: Council of Europe. [http://www.coe.int/t/e/human\\_rights/equality/PDF\\_CDEG\\_2009\\_1\\_final\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/equality/PDF_CDEG_2009_1_final_en.pdf)

<sup>[7]</sup> Icelandic Ministry for Foreign Affairs. (2008). *Women, Peace and Security: Iceland's Plan of Action for the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325* (2000). Reykjavík: Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

<sup>[8]</sup> Jochumsdóttir, M.R. (2009). *Landsnefnd UNIFEM á Íslandi: Saga, áherslur og aðferðir* [National Committee of UNIFEM in Iceland: History, emphases, and methods]. MA thesis in development studies, University of Iceland,

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[http://skemman.is/bitstream/1946/3380/1/Margret\\_Rosa\\_Jochumsdottir\\_fixed.pdf](http://skemman.is/bitstream/1946/3380/1/Margret_Rosa_Jochumsdottir_fixed.pdf).

<sup>[9]</sup> National Committee for UNIFEM in Iceland. (2007). *Ársskýrsla 2006 [Annual Report 2006]*. Reykjavík: UNIFEM. <http://www.unifem.is/unifem/images/stories/arsskyrslaunifem2006.pdf>

<sup>[10]</sup> UNIFEM. (2002). *UNIFEM Annual Report 2001*. New York: UNIFEM. [http://unifem.org/attachments/products/UNIFEM\\_AR\\_2001\\_ENG\\_2ndHalf.pdf](http://unifem.org/attachments/products/UNIFEM_AR_2001_ENG_2ndHalf.pdf); UNIFEM. (2003). *UNIFEM Annual Report 2002/2003*. New York: UNIFEM. [http://unifem.org/attachments/products/369\\_UNIFEM\\_AR\\_02-03\\_eng.pdf](http://unifem.org/attachments/products/369_UNIFEM_AR_02-03_eng.pdf); UNIFEM. (2004). *UNIFEM Annual Report 2003/2004*. New York: UNIFEM. [http://unifem.org/attachments/products/366\\_UNIFEM-AR04-lo.pdf](http://unifem.org/attachments/products/366_UNIFEM-AR04-lo.pdf); UNIFEM. (2005). *UNIFEM Annual Report 2004/2005*. New York: UNIFEM. [http://unifem.org/attachments/products/AnnualReport2004\\_2005\\_eng.pdf](http://unifem.org/attachments/products/AnnualReport2004_2005_eng.pdf); UNIFEM. (2006). *UNIFEM Annual Report 2005/2006*. New York: UNIFEM. [http://unifem.org/attachments/products/AnnualReport2005\\_2006\\_eng.pdf](http://unifem.org/attachments/products/AnnualReport2005_2006_eng.pdf); UNIFEM. (2007). *UNIFEM Annual Report 2006/2007*. New York: UNIFEM. [http://unifem.org/attachments/products/AnnualReport2006\\_2007\\_eng.pdf](http://unifem.org/attachments/products/AnnualReport2006_2007_eng.pdf); UNIFEM. (2008). *UNIFEM Annual Report 2007/2008*. New York: UNIFEM. [http://unifem.org/attachments/products/UNIFEM\\_AnnualReport\\_2007-2008.pdf](http://unifem.org/attachments/products/UNIFEM_AnnualReport_2007-2008.pdf); UNIFEM. (2009). *UNIFEM Annual Report 2008/2009*. New York: UNIFEM. [http://unifem.org/attachments/products/annual\\_report\\_2008\\_2009\\_en.pdf](http://unifem.org/attachments/products/annual_report_2008_2009_en.pdf)

<sup>[11]</sup> UN Women (2011): *UN Women Annual Report 2010-2011*. [http://www.unwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/UNwomen\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2010-2011\\_en.pdf](http://www.unwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/UNwomen_Annual_Report_2010-2011_en.pdf)

<sup>[12]</sup> Rehn, E., og Johnson Sirleaf, E. (2002). *Women, War, Peace: The Independent Experts' Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women's Role in Peace-Building*. New York: UNIFEM

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