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**The equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men
including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS**

Written statement*

Submitted by

**Kristin Astgeirsdottir
Centre for Gender Equality, Iceland**

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

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 stated that sharing housework is both fair and necessary in families with two breadwinners. The 1970's and 1980's saw a swift change in attitudes, especially concerning fathers participation in child-care. But that was not enough. Services for children and their working parents had to be build up to meet the needs of the labour market and the families. It wasn't until the Women's Party appeared on the political scene and consequently with the growing number of women in politics in the 1980's and 1990's that legislators and the municipalities were slowly convinced that sufficient services had to be provided. The reasons for reluctance on behalf of male politicians were partly financial and partly conservative views on the family and the role of women. Facts showed that most women in Iceland were no longer at home, they were needed in the labour market and they had educated themselves as professional women. Women demanded the right to take part in

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.

Prior to 1998 parental leave in Iceland was six months long, with very low compensation. In principle it was dividable between the parents, but in reality only mothers used it. The number of men on parental leave hardly registers, it was around 0.3 per cent most years. In 1998 fathers got a right to two weeks paternal leave, a leave that only they could use. Still the compensation was very low but around a third of the fathers used this opportunity to be with their family in the first weeks.

In May 2000 the Icelandic parliament (Althingi), responded to this criticism by adopting a new law on parental leave. The leave was lengthened in steps from six months to nine and divided between the parents so that three months were exclusively for the mother, three exclusively for the father and then there were three months that the parents can divide between themselves, as they like.

The parental leave means leave from salaried work due to the birth of your child, primary adoption and permanent foster. And you have 18 months to use your rights.

As for economic compensation those who have been active on the labour market receive 80per cent of their former wages while on leave. Initially it was calculated on the basis of wages for the last 12 months (ending two months before birth) but this was later changed to 24 months. A special fund was established to take care of payments. This fund receives

its income from a pay-roll tax so that everyone who pays wages in Iceland participates in the funding. This is crucial; it would have been a fatal mistake to leave it to individual employers to pay for the parental leave of their employees. Among other things it would have meant a severe handicap for young women seeking employment.

And lastly there was the introduction of a certain amount of flexibility so that now there was the possibility to combine work and leave any way you like as long as it is in agreement with the employer.

And finally the law protects employees against dismissal after they have told the employer that they plan to take parental leave. Employees also continue to accumulate rights, f.e. pension rights, during parental leave.

The law was adopted unanimously, not one of the members of Althingi (parliament) was against, but one member abstained from voting.

Among the stated goals of this change were to increase the participation of fathers in childcare, to improve the position of women on the labour market, to increase fertility and to improve the economic situation of families with children.

So let us look at what has happened since 2000. If we first look at how many Icelandic men are actually using the possibility to take paternal leave we see that there are between 84per cent and 90per cent who actually do so. The paternity leave was introduced in steps so that fathers got one month in 2001, two in 2002 and three in 2003. And the percentage of men using their rights has increased over time from 82.4per cent in 2001 to 89.8per cent in 2004.

We can also see that the number of days that men are using on average closely follows their individual rights. The average number of days that father's used was 39 days when they had a right to one month. When they had a right to two months the average use was 68 days and the average use in 2003 was 97 days. The preliminary figure for 2004 is 94 days and I am confident that we will end up with around 97-98 days. On the other hand women constantly take around 6 months showing once again what has been generally found to be the case all over Europe, that the period that can be shared between parents is mainly used by the mother.

The law enjoys popular support. Here are the main figures from an opinion poll taken by Gallup in 2003. Here it is perhaps most surprising how supportive the employers are.

So have we been successful? I think so. The economy of families with new-born children is clearly better than it was before. There are more fathers active in taking care of their small children than at any other time in Icelandic history. We have some indications that the labour market situation of men and women is becoming more similar. And finally fertility, which has been quite high, seems to be increasing. From an all-time low in 2002 of 1.93 children per woman we were up to 2.03 in 2004 and I am told by the people at the Icelandic statistical bureau that even though the figures for 2005 are not ready they are

higher than for 2004. This puts Iceland in the lead regarding fertility in Europe. Many studies show that if you force women to choose between having a career on the labour market and having children, more and more will choose the labour market. If you create the social conditions necessary for them to be able to do both, then they will do both. And secondly studies from among other countries Sweden, Hungary and Austria show that if the woman is pleased with the participation of the father in the caretaking of the first child, as well as his participation in the domestic chores, she is more likely to be willing to have more children.

As for the labour market we have some indications that the law is helping to make the labour market a more equal place for men and women. Secondly the trade unions tell us that the number of men who complain about illegal dismissals due to paternity leave has been increasing. Now it seems both mothers and fathers face this discrimination on the labour market.

And lastly, mass media has been reporting that now young men get similar questions, as young women in job-interviews, “Are you planning to have a baby in the next few years?”

Generally there are three conditions that have to be met if men are to take paternity leave. In the first place the economic compensations have to be such that it does not put the financial situation of the family at risk if the father takes paternity leave. It seems that a percentage of 75per cent to 80per cent of a parent’s salary is minimum. Secondly there has to be a period that only the father can use, i.e. non-transferable rights, guiding by the principle “use it or lose it”. And thirdly I think a certain amount of flexibility is necessary, that it should be possible to combine in some way work and parental leave. This is important for the employers and for the men/fathers. It will also become increasingly important for the women too.

And finally, if we want increased fertility and if we want both men and women to be active on the labour market then we need good institutional support, probably mainly in the form of play schools for children from around the age of 18 months.

So we see that parents in Iceland are sharing responsibilities in childcare more than ever. Concerning other responsibilities in the domestic sphere the picture is not as bright. A study from 2004 shows that women still have the double burden, i.e. on top of having a job they still do most of the housework and are responsible for the wellbeing of their families. It is also worrying that young people in Iceland seem to be more conservative in regard to equal opportunities than the generation of their parents.

The work on equality and equal opportunities for women and men has to continue. The roots of inequality lie deep into our culture and it takes a long time to tear them up and plant new and better ones. But it must be done.