

THE MENTALITY OF EQUALITY

Good afternoon, Dear Participants. I am honoured and delighted to be here, and I salute you regardless of any demographic definitions such as age, origin, colour, religious beliefs, gender orientation or status. Here we are equals. Welcome to Iceland.

My name is Sigríður Hrund and one of my many roles in life is that I am the Chairwoman of FKA – The Association of Women Business Leaders in Iceland. The Association was founded 24 years ago by 300 female entrepreneurs (business owners) but now holds over 1300 women from all over the country in diverse business sectors and is rapidly growing and expanding. We are leaders, middle managers, entrepreneurs, innovators etc.

I grew up with these strong role models as I was only 25 years old when FKA was founded. Strong women standing together in business is my reality and I know no other reality. Let alone the fact that when I'm only 6 years old Vigdís Finnbogadóttir is elected president of Iceland – the first woman in the world to be democratically elected as president. Her presidency lasted 16 years and ended when I was 22 years old. This is my childhood reality, and she is my role model.

I wanted to talk to you today about the Mentality of Equality and what it entails. Let me tell you, my story from my country.

I am lucky to be born and raised in Iceland. I was so fortunate to be raised half part by my grandparents as my parents were both hectically working. My grandparents both worked as well, my grandfather as a carpenter and my grandmother as a shop owner. My parents were multitaskers; my father was a lawyer, a carpenter, a writer and a Public Director, and my mother was a teacher, a shop owner, an inventor and an entrepreneur. They had 4 four children together.

I was also raised in gym classes at school where my mother taught. There I got to play while she worked as a gym teacher – she did not always have the option my generation had of subsidized childcare or kindergarten. So, my parents put me to school a year earlier – I started at 5 when my classmates were 6. By necessity.

In my school years I did not detect inequality between the genders. Sure, boys were stronger and faster but not cleverer in any way. I was raised to think I could do anything I wanted, and my father especially emphasized that I should be independent AND financially independent.

Everything seemed as it should be regarding gender equality until I hit the job market for real. Then the discrepancies were real.

I started working at the age of 8. I pleaded with my mother to deliver newspapers. I have had various jobs ever since and been financially independent from the beginning.

It thus came as a great surprise when entering the job market, having finished my fine education, that I was not being paid the same as the next person who happened to be male. Getting a raise was more difficult, getting ahead in job titles was more difficult, quite a bit of sexualization was around and even behaviours we would classify as sexual harassment today. This both frustrated me and made me angry and sad at the same time.

The society that raised me in equality was totally different from the job market. When I had children – I am blessed with four – I could take a maternity leave, but my husband had only a couple of weeks. When my first children were born, now 18 years old, I had a professional counterpart in California also due at the same time. My maternity leave was 6 months, hers was 6 weeks. I cried for her. She had to make a choice between her child and her work.

My youngest child is 7. This was my best scenario. Shortly after the birth of my third child, now age 12, I decided to take the leap from being an employee to becoming an employer and start my own business. I could work when and where I wanted and get paid as I wanted. The flexibility alone gave me a chance to work at home and attend to my other roles in life; being a loving mother and being a wife. But take notice – being an entrepreneur with your own business kind of robs you of the maternity leave and many other benefits employees have. If I don't show up for work – no one else will.

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Equality will not present itself by choice or chance alone. We need to facilitate the evolution of change and facilitate the action needed to make Equality a reality.

This year for the first time more women than men were elected in local governments or municipal councils in Iceland. We almost reached this point in the last Parliamentary elections. Governmental Equality exists but the Private Sector is seriously behind on all levels.

It is my firm belief that The Mentality of Equality is marked by deliberate Decisions and Implementation of Action.

Inequality is the Creation of Humans – so is Equality. These are NOT Natural Laws, but Choices and Decisions we make.

Post Covid we can see a huge back lash in Equality worldwide as women again and again became caretakers – of their families, the young, the old and the sick. I often say that a strong society is the one that takes care of their young, old, and sick by healthy infrastructure – good educational system, elderly services and health care system. This reveals the tangible obstruction in women's professional life that women hold more roles than men. We also put ourselves under and get more pressure and requirements than men. You can raise your hand if you relate. Work environment will have to transform to travel with the fact that women might and can have diverse family structures and challenges – children or not, caretaker or not. Women supporting other women is the key factor.

We are definitely NOT in the place where we want and need to be – because women need to be where Money flows, where Decisions are made and where Power lies in the organizations and institutions. The Challenge is the same as always. All genders getting the same opportunities.

The decision about gender equality has been made in Iceland – we are in the Implementation Phase right now. Constantly working on manifesting and realizing equality in every aspect of our society.

But making a Decision without Implementation is just having an Opinion.

A Decision needs an Action to be realized and manifested.

To finish this speech, I do not wish for any applause for myself, but I kindly ask you to salute the women that paved our way, our role models, our pioneers with a big hand of applause in gratitude.

We stand on their shoulders.

Thank you.