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Gender Equality Strategy

Iceland's International Development Cooperation

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1. Preface

The Icelandic government considers gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in development cooperation and humanitarian assistance to be the basis for progress and sustainable development. In its policy for international development cooperation for 2019-2023, Iceland supports the vision of the UN Sustainable Development Goals of a sustainable world in which hunger and extreme poverty have been eradicated, inequality has been reduced within and between states, the human rights of all are respected, and everyone is equal before the law and living in peace and safety in their daily lives.

This Gender Equality Strategy reaffirms Iceland's vision in the field of gender equality in development cooperation and considers international agreements and commitments regarding equality and the rights of women and girls¹.

An independent evaluation of Iceland's Gender Equality Policy 2013-2016² for international development cooperation has been conducted. Recommendations set forth in the evaluation have been used as a basis for this strategy, together with proposals set forth in the OECD DAC's peer review of Iceland 2017.

¹Among these: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Cairo Declaration on Population and Development, Reproductive Health and Family Planning, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, United Nations Security Council Resolution no. 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, and related resolutions, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

²[Evaluation of Iceland's Gender Equality Policy](#)

2. Guiding principles

Human rights, gender equality and sustainable development are core elements of Iceland's Policy for International Development Cooperation (2021-2023)³, with women's empowerment considered as a prerequisite for social progress and economic development in societies. Furthermore, gender equality is emphasised both as a stand-alone and a cross-cutting issue with an aim to work systematically to increase the rights of women and girls and accelerate progress of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Gender equality touches upon multiple strands of work within the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Gender mainstreaming is therefore an integral component within various policy areas.

Globally, Iceland holds a strong position in the field of gender equality. This presents an opportunity to share valuable experience and take on a leading role to place these issues high on the international agenda. These efforts should be guided by ambition, innovation and by scaling up successful measures.

Significant progress has been made towards gender equality over the past decades, including though concerted global efforts. Safeguarding these hard-won gains must be a priority as well as preventing and countering possible setbacks.

³ <https://www.government.is/library/01-Ministries/Ministry-for-Foreign-Affairs/Iceida/Publications/Parliamentary%20Resolution%20on%20Iceland%E2%80%99s%20policy%20for%20international%20development%20cooperation.pdf>

3. Priorities and thematic areas

Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls have long been guiding principles in Iceland's international development cooperation. In order to accelerate progress towards gender equality, the Icelandic government has identified five main focus areas within international development cooperation. When addressing these focus areas interlinkages are considered.

- i. **Gender-based violence**
- ii. **Health of women and girls**
- iii. **Empowerment of women**
- iv. **Education with an emphasis on girls**
- v. **Engaging men and boys in promoting gender equality**

Iceland's **cross-cutting priorities** within the Policy for International Development Cooperation 2019-2023 include an emphasis on these focus areas. Furthermore, they underscore respect for women's rights, the active and valid participation of women in environmental and climate issues, as well as in conflict areas and peace and reconstruction processes.

To maximize the overall impact of contributions, the Icelandic government prioritises the nexus of humanitarian assistance and development cooperation. Actions for gender equality are important in this context.

The **COVID-19 pandemic** has upended lives and livelihoods and greatly impacted social structures globally. Some of the long-term effects of the pandemic are yet to unfold but it is clear that the social, economic and health effects can be different for women and men, girls and boys and will leave the biggest impact on those most vulnerable. It is important that the international community responds with efficient and coordinated action, guided by a gendered lens. Iceland, together with the other Nordic countries, has been a strong advocate for gender equality when it comes to both short-term and long-term response efforts to COVID-19. In this context, Iceland has continuously called for increased attention and action for gender equality measures in international fora. This applies equally to international advocacy, emergency responses and bilateral and multilateral development cooperation. Iceland has also encouraged international organisations and institutions to collect gender statistics in a systematic way to address gender-based consequences of the pandemic.

The following sections cover Iceland's five focus areas in the field of gender equality, how they interconnect, and address the gender-based consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1 Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence is one of the most widespread human rights violations in the world and is prevalent in all societies. In this context, it is important to note that reports of domestic violence and intimate partner violence have increased worldwide since countries imposed curfews due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is critical to address this holistically e.g. by providing comprehensive resources for victims and survivors such as health care and psychosocial support, as well as, ensuring legal improvements and fair trials, reaching perpetrators of violence and promoting a change in societal attitudes.

Violence against women and children can increase in conflict and crisis affected situations. In this context, emphasis is put on protecting the rights of women and to increase their active participation in peacebuilding and peace processes. Protection against sexual violence and support for victims and survivors of violence remains equally important.

Women, Peace, and Security

The year 2000 marked a turning point in the history of the United Nations Security Council, as it was the first time that the Council addressed the importance of women's participation in peace making and conflict resolution. The Icelandic National Action Plan for Women, Peace, and Security (2018-2022)⁴ states that Iceland's contributions to humanitarian assistance should be allocated to initiatives that include gender perspectives.

National Action Plans for Women, Peace, and Security in Mozambique and Malawi: In partnership with UN Women, Iceland has supported the creation and implementation of National Action Plans for UN Resolution 1325 in Mozambique and Malawi. The aim is to ensure that peace processes and reconstruction efforts in societies contribute to gender equality and empowerment of women and girls. It is important that National Action Plans also address conflict related sexual and gender-based violence and that response and service delivery is comprehensive and accessible. This includes a clear role for both police and military.

Even though most countries have passed laws that prohibit **child and early forced marriages**, this harmful practice is still prevalent. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in child and early forced marriages, which is directly linked to the closure of schools. This form of gender-based violence is a manifestation of poverty and the lack of girls' agency. It is estimated that twelve million young girls are forced into marriage each year.

Significant progress in the elimination of child and early forced marriages has been achieved in recent years within Iceland's partner countries in bilateral

⁴ [National Plan for Women, Peace, and Security](#)

development cooperation. In Malawi, for example, village leaders have made great progress in the fight against this harmful practice.

Iceland is a co-leader in the Action Coalition on Gender-Based Violence in **UN Women's Generation Equality Forum**. Iceland's commitments within this project place an emphasis on service delivery and access to justice for survivors of gender-based violence, as well as prevention strategies, for example, with a focus on challenging social norms and engaging men and boys in promoting gender equality and become agents of change.

Iceland's leadership within the Generation Equality Forum is until 2026 and is guided by the following set of actions jointly defined by the Action Coalition on Gender-Based Violence:

- enabling policy making and legislation with the aim of eradicating gender-based violence.
- scaling up evidence driven prevention programming.
- scaling up comprehensive, accessible and quality services for survivors of gender-based violence.
- enabling and empowering autonomous girl-led & women's rights organizations to exercise their expertise.

3.2 Health

Female genital mutilation (FGM) can cause a lifetime of severe health problems and pain. This harmful practice is also a serious violation of human rights and a manifestation of gender inequality and gender-based violence. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that more than 200 million women and girls live with the long-term health consequences of such mutilations. The Icelandic government supports regional solutions to end this harmful practice.

Iceland supports women's access to **sexual health and reproductive services**. The Icelandic government believes that strengthening basic services and reinforcing the institutions that provide such services is an effective approach to improve living standards and increase opportunities for those living in poverty. Iceland places an emphasis on women's access to basic health services, which includes improved access to and information on their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights in Malawi

A three-year project in Malawi aims to promote sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescent girls and women.

Emphasis is placed on gender equality and human rights in health care with an objective to increase knowledge and services related to contraception to prevent premature pregnancies of adolescent girls.

Special emphasis is placed on engaging men and boys to take responsibility and show an interest in these issues.

Furthermore, the project's objective is to strengthen centres for survivors of violence where they can access comprehensive services and counselling.

Women's bodily autonomy and improved access to healthcare provide them with increased opportunities to actively participate in their communities and to enjoy their human rights. Women and girls face many obstacles when it comes to their sexual and reproductive health, both legally and socially, whether related to access to quality services or education.

Maternity services and infant care must be prioritized within the healthcare system. In recent years, there has been progress made in reducing maternal mortality. This has been achieved through adequate healthcare services tailored to the needs of pregnant women and improving women's participation in maternity care and education during pregnancy. Another important factor is guaranteed access to contraception and educational material on sexual health for everyone. Despite increased pressure on healthcare systems due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical that maternity services are prioritised.

Obstetric fistula is an example of the gender-related health risks that young mothers face in low-income countries that can be prevented with improved maternity services. Fistula occurs after difficult births and manifests itself in the crippling of young mothers who are not physically mature enough to have children. The girls are often ostracised and therefore also suffer socially. Iceland has placed great emphasis on projects related to prevention, rehabilitation, surgery, and treatment of obstetric fistula. Iceland's bilateral co-operation has supported the development of operating theatres in the Mangochi District in Malawi and in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, which offer surgeries to repair obstetric fistula and social assistance in bringing women back into society after surgery.

3.3 Empowerment

There is a strong correlation between the **economic and political empowerment of women** and the well-being of their families and children. Poverty is reduced, family members enjoy improved nutrition and health, and children are more likely to have access to education.

The responsibility of **unpaid domestic and care work** often rests with women and girls rather than men and boys. As a result of COVID-19, unpaid work of this kind has increased, and women and girls are increasingly taking care of sick family members. Unequal division of these responsibilities can limit opportunities for women and girls in relation to education, employment, and negatively affect their well-being.

Improved access to clean water and water sources in the local community means that women and girls are less likely to have to carry water long distances many times a day, and they are safer when water sources are closer to their homes. It also reduces the workload and labour of women and girls and saves time. This can leave more time for them to attend work or school and creates space for women to participate in water committees, school boards and health committees that influence and make decisions about the fundamental human rights of their communities.

Iceland has also placed great emphasis on the role of **trade in international development cooperation**. It is essential to increase trade opportunities for developing countries and facilitate their access to markets in order to promote sustainable development. In this context, Iceland emphasises the importance of gender and trade both through advocacy and through financial contributions. For a number of years, Iceland has supported the International Trade Centre to implement a project called "SheTrades", which focuses on the economic empowerment of women in developing countries and/or conflict affected areas, connecting them to international markets.

Environmental and climate issues are defined as both cross-cutting and stand-alone priorities in Iceland's Policy for International Development Cooperation⁵, with an emphasis on women's economic empowerment and active participation in environmental and climate policy. Societal and cultural groups can be impacted differently by climate change. Gender inequality makes women more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, those living in poverty are particularly at risk as weather extremes can lead to failed harvests and disasters. The experiences, knowledge and expertise of women and men are different, it is therefore vital to approach new strategies for climate-resilience and sustainable livelihoods with a gendered lens that includes the active

⁵This focus area covers the following performance indicators on the SDGs: 1.5, 5.5, 6.2, 7.2, 13.2.

participation of women. Iceland promotes women's participation and leadership training to increase women's share in important decision-making processes and negotiations. Internationally, the Icelandic government participates in climate cooperation in accordance with the provisions of the Paris Agreement, and an emphasis is placed on women's participation and gender perspectives in climate-related projects.

It is also important that women are active participants in **peace negotiations**, **peace building initiatives**, and in conflict prevention in line with the UN Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security and Iceland's National Action Plan on this agenda.

3.4 Education

The equal rights of boys and girls to education is a fundamental human right. According to the Icelandic Development Cooperation policy, education is one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty and promote societal development, while at the same time reducing inequality. Placing a special emphasis on girls' education is important, as girls in low-income countries have been forced to drop out of school to a greater extent than boys.⁶

In its bilateral development cooperation and support through multinational organisations, Iceland has focused on creating conditions that encourage children to complete primary school, lay the foundation for a good education, provide access to potable water, and provide access to sanitary facilities. Iceland has also contributed to ensure that school buildings conform to national standards and in partnership with parents, ensure that school meals are accessible.

The education of girls has a multiplier effect, educated girls are more likely to marry later and have fewer children who enjoy a higher life expectancy⁷.

Access to clean water and adequate sanitation facilities, as well as gender-segregated toilets, are important factors in increasing girls' school attendance. In its bilateral development cooperation and through multinational cooperation, the Icelandic government emphasises these aspects in the planning of school buildings and that special attention is paid to the needs of women and girls, and those who are in a vulnerable position. Access to water and soap is also essential to overcome the spread of COVID-19.

⁶ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375707>

⁷ <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Child-marriage-evidence-report-2021.pdf>

3.5 Engaging men and boys for gender equality

Gender discrimination is prevalent in all sectors and all societies. Despite lasting achievements in various areas for gender equality the pace of progress has been slow. If the trend continues at the same pace, it is estimated that it will take more than two centuries to achieve gender equality.⁸ Iceland will continue to be a strong advocate for gender equality and raise awareness, this will include a specific emphasis on measures to mobilise and engage men and boys to accelerate progress for gender equality. These include:

- **Barbershop:** Emphasis is placed on encouraging men and boys to increase their engagement with the issue through various **Barbershop** events⁹ that have been held around the world since 2015. The purpose of the events is to create a platform for people, with an emphasis on male participation, to discuss gender equality issues and analyse how inequality can be addressed and gender equality promoted in their immediate environment. A **Barbershop** Toolbox was developed with the support of Iceland and UN Women Iceland. Iceland has hosted several **Barbershop** events worldwide, e.g., at UN headquarters in NY, NATO, Icelandic parliament and with Mangochi's district government in Malawi.
- **Generation Equality:** The participation of men and boys in eradicating gender-based violence is one of the main priorities for Iceland in the Action Coalition on Gender-Based Violence under the auspices of the **UN Women Generation Equality Forum**.

Men's participation in gender equality activities

The Icelandic government's Gender Equality Action Plan for the period of 2020–2023 provides that the Ministry for Foreign Affairs shall place an emphasis on the role of men in gender equality activities in the international arena. This shall include setting up "Barbershop" conferences within the international bodies Iceland is a member of, e.g. the World Bank, in order to urge men to shoulder their responsibilities in the field of gender equality. This shall also include presenting Iceland's point of view on this issue within the international bodies Iceland is a member of and in bilateral relations with other states. Icelandic men shall be encouraged to support the aims of the UN Women HeForShe campaign in accordance with Iceland's obligations under the UN Women IMPACT campaign. Collaboration within the Icelandic governmental system shall be increased, as well as collaboration with non-governmental organizations. The objective of the project is to increase men's ownership of and participation in equal rights activities.

⁸ See: <https://www.weforum.org/projects/closing-the-gender-gap-accelerators>

⁹E. barbershop. See further: <https://www.heforshe.org/en/barbershop>

4. Working practices

4.1 Awareness raising and policy dialogue

Iceland's standing in gender equality internationally provides an opportunity for the country to take a lead in placing the issues high on the international agenda. This also carries a responsibility to lead by example and continue to prioritize gender equality domestically and accelerate progress. In development cooperation, it is important to share best practices and lessons learned, and to seek innovative solutions from other countries that set a good example for gender equality.

Iceland will continue to cooperate with other stakeholders in this field and take on a leading role amongst donor countries.

In Iceland's development cooperation and international advocacy, it is important to consider the complex social realities behind the manifestations of inequality. Iceland bases its approach and vision on **intersectionality**, which encompasses the understanding that more factors than gender affect an individual's position in society. Factors such as social status, sexual orientation, race, gender identity, gender expression, age, disability, and religion must also be considered. Individuals can belong to more than one marginalised group and experience multiple forms of discrimination.

Implementation of the Gender Equality Seal in development cooperation

The Icelandic government's Gender Equality Action Plan 2020–2023 provides that the Ministry for Foreign Affairs shall introduce equal rights certification into Iceland's international development cooperation in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) during the term of validity of the Action Plan. The plan was for Iceland to become the first of the member state of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and its Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to implement such a gender equality certification process.

The aim of the certification is to make gender equality in development work more targeted, improve work processes and empower staff to be better equipped to carry out professional internal and external work on gender equality issues and gender mainstreaming. Another main objective of the certification is to support the Ministry and Iceland's embassies in Lilongwe and Kampala in their internal development cooperation strategy work, with a special emphasis on external activities in the field of gender equality.

The implementation process began in June 2019 and was completed in April 2022 when Iceland became the first donor country to be awarded the gold certification on gender equality.

4.2 Gendered statistics and planning

From 2011, Iceland has applied the methodology of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), the so-called **Gender Equality Policy Marker**¹⁰, which is a statistical tool for project analysis. This entails an assessment on whether projects in bilateral development cooperation and earmarked contributions to international organisations make a positive impact on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

DAC Gender Equality Policy Marker and Iceland's performance
Iceland is a world leader when it comes to promoting gender equality in development cooperation, which is reflected in the OECD/DAC's annual review of the use of the Gender Equality Policy Marker.
Over 80% of Iceland's projects and earmarked contributions to international organisations in recent years have been aimed at the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. About 8% of Iceland's projects have gender equality and the empowerment of women as their main objective.

In addition to the standard three-point scoring system used by the DAC, Iceland has added one category to track the progress of goals for gender transformative projects. This refers to projects that have a systematic impact that revolutionises the status of gender equality in a specific field. Support and projects are classified as shown in figure 1, ranging from whether projects do not have gender equality as an objective, whether projects systematically promote gender equality and women's empowerment, or whether gender equality and women's empowerment are the primary objectives of the development intervention. The highest level is reached when a project has a gender transformative effect.

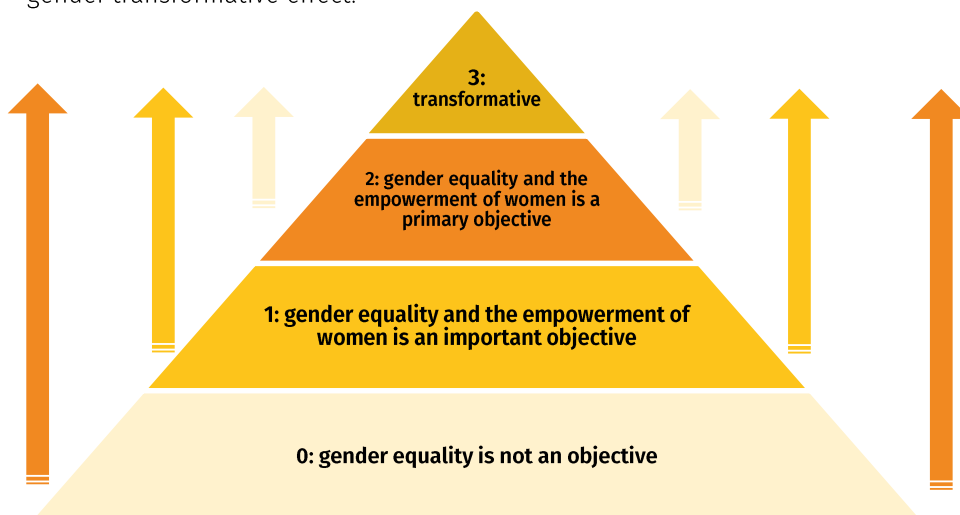


Figure1 DAC gender equality policy marker

¹⁰ E. Gender Equality Policy Marker

In addition to the usage of the Gender Equality Policy Marker Iceland applies gender mainstreaming methods in line with gender-responsive budgeting. This means that gender perspectives are taken into account at all stages of budgeting, and revenues and expenditures are restructured in order to promote gender equality.

4.3 Prevention of sexual violence and/or abuse

Iceland is part of a cooperative effort between 22 countries that sets common requirements for international organisations and institutions to the effect that donor countries commit to stipulating measures for the prevention of gender-based and sexual violence and have in place clear processes regarding notifications, investigations, and follow-up if such issues arise. The staff of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, as well as of Government entities, receive training and information on how to respond in such cases and how to promote change in the institutional culture for prevention.

4.4 Responsibility, results, and evaluations

Iceland applies holistic results-based management in its development cooperation. One of the main methodologies used for monitoring and results-based management in the field of gender equality is gender statistics. Gender equality-related work shall be framed by action plans that set out goals and timed milestones. The annual results reports shall also outline Iceland's work and performance in the field of gender equality in development cooperation for each operating year.

The Icelandic government shall report on the quality and results of its development cooperation. Results, efficiency, and professionalism are key factors in decision-making when allocating funds to development cooperation and the impact of those decisions on the progress for gender equality shall be accounted for. All projects and contributions of Iceland shall be examined systematically with regard to gender equality before they are implemented, or financial contributions are made.

Evaluations are a critical tool for learning, informed decision making and enhanced accountability in development cooperation. Iceland follows its evaluation policy and applies OECD-DAC principles and standards for evaluation of its development cooperation. Iceland's evaluation policy for international development cooperation states that evaluations shall assess the contribution of projects as pertains to gender equality. Furthermore, gender equality shall be considered and integrated into Iceland's annual evaluation plans.

