

Kristín A. Árnadóttir, Ambassador of Iceland

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To accept the challenge

- Reflections on women's rights in Iceland, role models and global perspectives

Dear leaders of Hong Kong Women Federation, honorable guests, dear friends,

It is a great pleasure to join you today, on the occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the Hong Kong Federation of Women (HKFW). I wish to congratulate and thank you for inviting me to attend the event. Allow me at the outset to pay tribute to the achievements of your organization and the dedication with which you sought to strengthen women in their leading roles, be it in government, business, culture and social affairs, be it as independent women or other responsibilities taken on.

I certainly feel honored to participate in a Forum on the theme “Searching for a New Dimension for Hong Kong Women”. While having listened attentively and learning about the achievements of HKFW over the past 20 years, I will, in my remarks, stay true to the objectives of the Forum and share experiences and views from my own country, Iceland, that has proactively sought to enhance women's rights. I look forward to explore with you how best to facilitate further achievements in promoting local and global awareness.

PHOTO 1:



Our shared inspiration is not least the achievement of the UN's Fourth World Women's Summit in Beijing in 1995. Since, the UN has actively made gender and equality issues one of its campaign goals, including the establishment of UN Women in 2011 and dedicated theme campaigns every year to improve women's rights.

Iceland has emphasized the importance of the commitments made by UN member states and the international community invested in the Beijing Declaration. A milestone was reached in Beijing, achievements have been made, but the full integration of a gender perspective to ensure full implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action remains unattained, yet crucial. In this same vein I remain alerted to the fact that crucial Millennium Development Goals (MDG), aside from the above implied MDG 3, the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women, the MDGs 4 and 5, the reduction of child mortality and the improvement of maternal health, will neither be achieved by 2015. This is a sad outlook that one should not allow to be offset by achievements in some parts of the world, such as in the Peoples Republic of China, as opposed to many others.

We need to thus reinforce our common efforts to ensure that the overriding objective is always to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment - with zero tolerance for backlashes on commitments made.

PHOTO 2:



Dear guests,

I was once in an interview in Beijing asked to compare the Chinese system to that of my own country. I answered that these are two very different ones, however, having in common to be patriarchies, a gendered system, male dominated in their essence and by characteristics. We can debate the pros and cons of socialism and capitalism, but both are gendered systems, intriguingly woven into our different histories and cultures and have proven more resilient than any other order.

While we have in the last few decades witnessed the rise and fall of many political institutions, nation states dissolving, colonial regimes abolished, financial and economic systems in crises swirl the world, the patriarchy remains all over the world as a sustained system.

This fact calls for special awareness, domestic, national and transnational efforts, to safeguard the rights of women as a group of lesser advantages and opportunities.

The fact remains that it takes a clear vision, strong determination, sisterhood and women spearheading in all fields to arrive at, and uphold, balance and harmony

based on equal opportunities and fairness, harmony within our societies. Even between societies, between nature and humankind, and for the future generations to come to secure peace regardless of where on earth they live. This is the challenge, and we women need to be inspired and to accept challenges. We need to have significant role models, and strive to become or to be ones ourselves.

Dear hosts and audience,

This brings me to the state of art in Iceland. First, let me reflect on how events and roles triggered my own enthusiasm for gender issues and women's empowerment.

PHOTO 3: Women's day in Iceland 1975



As a young woman, recently married and pregnant with my first child, the 24th of October 1975 marked a turning point in my life as it was for so many others, home and abroad. On this day in Iceland, the United Nations Day, Icelandic women mounted a general strike and brought the country to a halt - if not to a standstill – for a day. Women left their work, young and old, in homes and workplaces, flocked by the thousands to the streets, in a joint effort to claim recognition for their key roles in all areas of society, not least their contribution to the economy. This day was an awakening, which raised the awareness among women about the importance of sisterhood and solidarity, and that they could and should demand recognition and their equal share. I, like so many others, was extremely inspired and realized that this was the politics I wanted to be engaged in, that I wanted to

join hands with other women so it would not become a one day action but leading to a new start where women jointly challenged the mainstream politics and the traditional role of women.



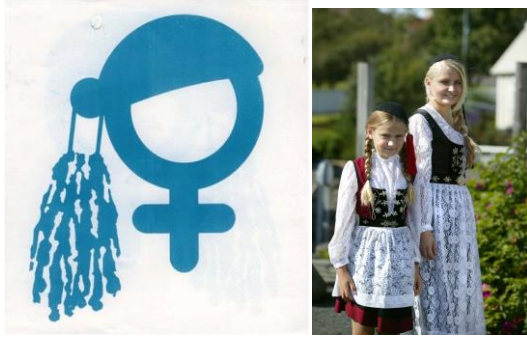
Photo 4: President Vigdis

Following this, in 1980, another break-through event was the election of President Vigdis Finnbogadóttir.

Vigdis was the first woman in the world to be elected as head of state in a democratic election. She did so despite being a divorced single mother of an adopted daughter. Mme Vigdis was narrowly elected, with 33.6 percent of the national vote, over three male competitors. She was subsequently reelected three times before she retired in 1996. Currently, she is a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador.

President Vigdis asked that I would bring to the audience today, and to HKFW, her best regards and convey appreciation for having been invited to participate in this event – which she unfortunately could not do on this date.

PHOTO 5: SKOTTÚFAN



Now, let me mention the third momentum I want to stress as of importance, for the development of women, gender issues, and for my personal and professional engagement. This was in 1983, when a country-wide political party called the Women's Alliance devoted to feminist issues was established in Iceland, running for the Parliament, winning three seats for the first term and six in the following term.

I joined the Parliamentary group, as the executive officer, in 1983 for two years and considered myself highly privileged to be part of the ambitious group of women who challenged the traditional male-based party system as well as the existing political establishment. The Women's Alliance paved the way for a new approach, and changed the mainstream politics in Iceland – making spillover in all areas of society. This most certainly has shaped the perception by women that they should for the sake of society, if not for themselves, be active in all spheres – keeping in mind that women are half of every population. Women “hold up half the sky”, as Chairman Mao Zedong is so famously quoted.

The inspiration for a women's party was rooted in the women's day off a few years prior, and the election of our female president Vigdis who was a leading role model.

Others have since held the torch high and I want to take this opportunity to name, apart from President Vigdis, two courageous ladies that have led by examples. This I do with due respect to all the others contributing greatly to our common cause. And, emphasizing that it is a strong unity of women, the group, that yet is the foundation and the backbone of any individual success.

The first is my long-time collaborator and good friend, Ingibjorg Solrun Gisladdottir, MP for the Women's Alliance, Mayor of Reykjavik for almost a decade, later the leader of the Social Democratic Party and the Foreign Minister of Iceland.

Ingibjörg Sólrún defined equal rights and the empowerment of women as one of the main pillars of Icelandic foreign policy during her tenure as Foreign Minister. She now serves on the most challenging post, being the head of UN Women in Afghanistan. She sown many seeds that are now being harvested as I will mention later in my talk.

Photo 6: Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir with dr. Annie Wu



The third leader I want to recognize specifically for advocating social cohesion and equal rights is Johanna Sigurdardottir who served as the Prime Minister of Iceland until less than a week ago when a new government was formed. Prime Minister Jóhanna has fought for 35 years as a Parliamentarian and a Minister for a better society and has been a strong role model for women in Iceland. She took on the most difficult task of economic reconstruction as a leader of a government after the

international financial crisis. As you may know Iceland was the first country to be hit severely in 2008 but is now well on the way to recovery. The official visit of Prime Minister Jóhanna Sigurdardóttir to China took place in April at the invitation of Premier Li Keqiang; a visit of great significance. Here you see her, accompanied with my good friend dr. Annie Wu and three female Ambassadors of the Icelandic Foreign service, including myself.

Let me stress that I am certain that the official visit of Prime Minister Jóhanna, accompanied by her wife, will prove a historic one. No less for the reason that her spouse is of the same sex, than for the importance of the Free Trade Agreement signed between China and Iceland during her visit. I dare to say that it will prove a ground-breaking event of much wider significance than we might realize today.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Having given you this brief background of Icelandic experience and leading role-models, let me emphasize a few key issues that I believe to be of significant impact when it comes to empowerment of women.

Firstly, let me reiterate that role models – pioneering women - pave the way for others and shape our perception of who we are, and that we can indeed achieve our aspirations. I shall also emphasize that while individuals are of key importance vision and the cause itself stand for the overriding universal principles.

Secondly, a critical mass is one of the key prerequisites for a favorable working environment. There are indications that when a critical mass is reached in certain fields, or in a group, be it 30% or 40 %, women are empowered, build their own constituencies and start to do things in different ways, on their own terms. Needless to say we should not aim for less than fair and equal representation and for

recognition of the issues that women, in every society, have kept at heart in their activities.

Thirdly, let's bear in mind that networking, a network of women, is a key element for success. We need to stand together in friendship and in support of one another, in partnerships and cooperation. In short; in solidarity and sisterhood.

Finally, - these prerequisites raised are by no means the only ones of importance – I will claim that awareness per se is another key variable. Awareness of strengths, potential, will, competencies and capacities. It is also called self-awareness and self-confidence.

Education, access to formal education, and knowledge, is the basis of all the above.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This is not only true for women but countries alike.

The Icelandic society, sharing characteristics with the other Nordic countries, rests on a deep rooted welfare system and values of democracy and equal rights. We score higher than others when it comes to gender balance and equal rights situation.

The Global Gender Gap Report 2012, by the World Economic Forum, emphasizes persisting gender gap divides across and within regions. Based on the seven years of data available for the 111 countries that have been part of the report since its inception, it finds that the majority of countries covered have made slow progress on closing gender gaps.

Last year's findings show that Iceland tops the overall rankings in The Global Gender Gap Index for the fourth consecutive year. Finland ranks in second position, and Northern European countries dominate the top 10.

The index continues to track the strong correlation between a country's gender gap and its national competitiveness. Because women account for one-half of a country's potential talent base, a nation's competitiveness in the long term depends significantly on whether and how it educates and emancipates its women.

Needless to say I am very proud of this record of my country. Yet we acknowledge that there is still work to be done, and challenges that we relentlessly must tackle. A big gap in wages persists, explained to a large extent by the undervalue of the traditional roles of women. Less is paid for services that women have through the ages rendered to their families, in the sectors of care, education and support. Measures of poverty show that women are the poorest in our society as in others, and they are the victims of violation and sexual abuse. These and more remain a reality, are persisting problems albeit being addressed.

As regards leadership, women do not as easily reach into the top executive posts and boards. This year, a new law enters into force in Iceland where a quota is set, and all enterprises with more than 50 staff-members, are to ensure an equal representation of men and women on their boards. This has already led to high increase and will prove successful.

In order to continue the work on gender issues and to counteract current challenges, the government has approved a new Plan of Action on Gender Equality for the period 2011-2015. It is based on 8 themes, with over 40 projects. Some of the

themes are new milestones in our approach, like gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting, other a constant search of sustainable success in creating a gender balance in society. This refers to bridging the gender pay gap, improving the work-life balance, enhancing and supporting women in entrepreneurship. Also, advocating non tolerance towards gender based violence, establishing gender education in schools from preschool to universities, changing stereotypes and attitudes, addressing pornography in popular culture and increasing the role of men in gender equality.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I stated earlier not only women but states, small states perhaps more so than others, need to build on their key values and characteristics. Sharpen their voice in order to be heard. Present their added-value in a focused manner. One needs to have faith in oneself, and act accordingly.

This Iceland has done in the international context, as it defines itself as an expert and a bench-mark country for others in a few fields. We have an excellent reputation in sustainable fisheries and green energy, as well as in gender equality. This is where we decided to add value and contribute in the UN context.

The United Nations University, founded in 1975, is dedicated to the generation and transfer of knowledge, and the strengthening of individual and institutional capacities in furtherance of the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations. The University consists of a network of training centers and programs in 13 countries around the world. Iceland became one of the first member countries of the United Nations to operate a training program when the UNU-Geothermal Training Program (UNU-GTP) was founded in 1978. The UNU-Fisheries Training

Program (UNU-FTP) was established in 1998 and the United Nations University Land Restoration Program (UNU-LTR) was established in 2010. Since 1978 over 600 scientists and experts from all over the world have graduated from the three programs in Iceland.

PHOTO 8



Today it gives me great pleasure to inform you that as of 9 May this year Gender Equality becomes the fourth pillar in the specific role Iceland plays in transferring know-how and experience, enhancing world-wide what we believe we are best at. The new program is known as UNU-GEST Program and its overall goal is to provide training for specialists from developing countries and post-conflict societies to better enable them to work towards gender equality in their home countries. The program emphasizes the enhancement of women's empowerment in the spirit of UN millennium goals.

The GEST Program started as a pilot project of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the University of Iceland in 2009 with the aim of becoming a part of the United Nations University.

Photo 8: ISG at the UN



Foreign Minister Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir pioneered this foreign policy goal during her tenure. A tripartite agreement between the Icelandic Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the United Nations University, and the University of Iceland, has now been signed. Since 2009, fellows from Afghanistan, Palestine, Mozambique and Uganda have graduated. Tomorrow, on 31 May 2013, new students will join this group of graduates, and gradually it will empower women from all over the world.

Strong emphasis is placed on how and why women's participation in peace building efforts are important in accordance with UN Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Moreover, the program focuses on integrating gender into environmental issues, such as climate change and sustainable use of natural resources, including fisheries, energy resources and land restoration.

Ladies and gentlemen,

One cannot separate the personal and the professional - which are the different sides of the same coin. Likewise, the domestic and the international are closely related and interdependent. In searching for new dimensions and exploring the way forward for the development of women, in Iceland or in Hong Kong, we need to bench-mark and cooperate.

I have limited expertise on Hong Kong specifics but I imagine that the general challenges are of the same nature as elsewhere when it comes to women's rights. Each society, like individuals, has to take concrete measures based on assessment of weaknesses, strength and opportunities.

I have shared with you my reflections and experiences from Iceland, and have myself benefited greatly from your spirit. I have seen what strong and visionary women in mainland China and in Hong Kong are capable of. Being Iceland's Ambassador in China has added new dimensions to my life and understanding of sisterhood.

I wish the Hong Kong Federation of Women all the best, and you my friends, success in your endeavor and good work.

I hope to cooperate with you in coming years and strengthen friendship and precious personal and professional relations for years to come.

On a positive and inspiring note I will make the words of my friend dr. Annie Wu my closing words. She said when she was asked what the secret of her success, and I quote: "Try to do the impossible. Try to take challenges and set goals for yourself. The more you read, the more you know, the more you can envision something unique."

Thank you for your attention.

8. 03.2013

Women Ambassadors in Beijing Join forces

It is a good thing that for many Chinese International Women's Day is not only an official event, but a real occasion to celebrate women and their irreplaceable contribution to the development of modern China. We have all been impressed by the hard work, expertise, resilience, good cheer and dedication of Chinese women.

But International Women's Day is also a reminder that in most countries equality between women and men is still elusive. Discrimination and violence against women are pervasive in all regions of the world. As much as ever, global solidarity and action are needed. We, several female Ambassadors and Representatives currently accredited to the People's Republic of China, feel we should all join forces even more vigorously to ensure the full enjoyment of women's rights everywhere and to prevent violence against women wherever it occurs. We can exchange views and best-practices on how to achieve dignity and integrity for all women and an end to gender-based violence, economic independence for both women and men, equal pay for work of equal value as well as equality in decision making. We appeal to the news media to continue to build public awareness of the need for the equality between women and men.

Almost 20 years since the last International Women's Conference was held in Beijing in 1995, the global picture of the status of women is truly bleak.

All over the world, women continue to suffer violence simply because they are women. They are gang-raped or abused by intimate partners. They are killed or maimed in the name of honor, for dowry issues, as a result of son-preference or because they lobby for polio vaccinations or basic schooling for girls. Women are specifically targeted in armed conflict.

When war ends, women are largely absent from the negotiating tables of peace-processes and are not included in recovery and state-building. Participation in political and economic decision-making is uneven from one country to the next, but large strides are necessary almost everywhere to ensure that all societies can draw fully on the potential of their women. Globally women account for only 17 % or the representatives in national parliaments, according to the UN report, *The World's Women 2010*. The percentage of women mayors is even lower. Glass ceilings are frequently experienced by women leaders in all aspects of social, economic and political life.

As we rally for more energetic action for women's rights, it is important to remember that women are not a minority and not a vulnerable group. Women represent one half of humanity; they hold up one half of the sky, as Chairman Mao Ze Dong reminded. Down on earth, they teach in schools and work in hospitals; they keep our farms and factories going and care for our children and elderly. Economic, social, cultural or religious arguments cannot be construed to deny women's human rights.

The 21st century offers significant challenges to all our societies. We will stand a better chance to negotiate them successfully, if we can draw on the combined resources of women and men. Once women are able to participate in all social, economic and political decisions on an equal footing with men, we will also make progress in eliminating the root causes of systemic violence against women. This will mark the transition to sustainable and truly civilized societies.

Shall we join hands today to usher in a brighter future for all of humankind ?

-By Ambassadors Frances J. ADAMSON (Australia), Irene GINER-REICHL (Austria), Carmenza JARAMILLO (Colombia), Ioanna MALLIOTIS (Cyprus), Sylvie BERMANN (France), Ingrida LEVRENCE (Latvia), Helen Mamie KOFI (Ghana), Kristin A. ARNADOTTIR (Iceland), Lina ANTANAVICIENE (Lithuania), Marija ADANJA (Slovenia), Marta BETANZOS (Spain), Rosario PORTELL (Uruguay), Rocio MANEIRO (Venezuela), Carmen CANO (EU), Coosje HOOGENDOORN (INBAR), Ann D. HERBERT (ILO), Irene HORS (OECD), Renata

LOK-DESSALLIEN (UN), Gillian MELLOP (UNICEF)