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- DRAFT PAPER -

**Within the Aura of Gender Equality: Icelandic work cultures, gender relations and family responsibility**

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Interest in the topic of work and family life has been fuelled by recent social changes. All over Europe women’s participation in the labour market is increasing (Lewis, 2001). The participation of married and cohabiting women in the labour market has changed gender relations and challenged the male breadwinner model. But this redistribution of economic responsibility has not necessarily been followed by changes of domestic and caring responsibilities. Men are only slowly reducing their working hours, and they have been slow to take part in parenting and other caring obligations (see for example Connell, 2005; Orrange, Firebaugh, & Heck, 2003; Ólafsson, 1990; Segal, 1990; Thórdarson, Jónsdóttir, Thórsdóttir, Arnalds, & Jónsson, 2008; Thórsdóttir, 2007). Both parents working full time have not meant that men devote as much time as women in child care. Acker (2006) has pointed out that in the dual breadwinner model women are often ‘junior partners’ because women’s wages are lower than men’s, which in turn leads to them shouldering the main responsibility for child care and domestic work (see also Orrange, et al., 2003).

Craig (2006) analysed diary data from Australia and suggests that “masculinization of women’s work patterns has been matched neither by masculinization of women’s care patterns nor by feminization of men’s care patterns” (p. 274). This means that even though women contribute to the economy in the form of paid labour as men, thus ‘masculinization’, men have not contributed to the economy in the form of unpaid labour, i.e. child care. Craig (2006) adds: “Fathers’ limited care goes beyond that which could be attributed to limited time availability” (p. 276). This means that father’s limited care cannot be explained entirely by their limited time off from paid employment. Attempts to promote new attitudes, such as encouraging men to increase their caring responsibilities, are counteracted by strong forces

pulling in the opposite direction, namely the culture of long working hours among men and men's close ties to their workplace (Hochschild, 1997).

Milkie and Peltola (1999) found that employed women may be successfully compromising between work and family life while doing more than men in the home. This comes at the expense of sleep, leisure, relaxation, and self-fulfilment. Charles and Harris (2007) compared work-life reconciliation choices among heterosexual couples belonging to different generations. They found the younger generation to be in a process of individualization where choices are made based on negotiations and pragmatism more than on a notion based on prefixed gender roles. However, men earn more than women and often have more job securities which mean women stay at home and care for children more than men.

The concept 'work-family balance' has been defined by Hill, Hawkins, Ferris, & Weitzman (2001, p. 49) as "the degree to which an individual is able to simultaneously balance the temporal, emotional, and behavioural demands of both paid work and family responsibilities." The work-family culture of an organization has been defined by Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness (1999, p. 394) as "the shared assumptions, beliefs, and values regarding the extent to which an organization supports and values the integration of employees' work and family lives." Various scholars use a number of terms to describe the connection between work and family. Some use the word 'balance' (e.g. Hill et al. discussed previously). Crompton and Lyonette (2006) talk about work-family conflict because the term 'balance' has only practical meaning: "If couples, somehow or other, manage to combine dual earning with caring responsibilities it is assumed that a 'balance' has been reached" (p. 380). Following Crompton's and Lyonette's argument, I use simultaneously the phrases 'reconciling family life and work' and 'compromising between work and family life'.

Reconciliation policies – for reconciling work and family life – reflect measures and practices on many different levels. They can be a part of the national legal framework, collective agreements, corporate specific agreements – both formal and informal – and they may be individual negotiations carried out on a daily basis. The measures and practices presented under the umbrella of 'family-friendly', 'work-life' or 'flexibility' policies can take several forms, such as ample sick leave for children, parental leave, flexitime, flexiplace etc. The reconciliation of family and working life is one of the most pressing policy and political issues facing modern societies.

The notion of 'work culture' has become a common sense expression meaning 'the way we do things around here'. The organizational literature has put this everyday expression into a larger theoretical perspective (Acker, 1992; Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Gherardi, 1995;

Schein, 1992) and organizational culture has been defined in various ways. Alvesson (2002) chooses to approximate the issue of organizational culture from an angle he calls ‘multiple cultural configuration’ defined in the following way:

[O]rganizations can best be understood as shaping local versions of broader societal and locally developed cultural manifestations in a multitude of ways. Organizational cultures are then best understood not as unitary wholes or as stable sets of subcultures but as mixtures of cultural manifestations of different levels and kinds (pp. 190-191).

Alvesson’s definition aims at putting under one roof work culture (e.g. average working hours in a society), organizational culture and the broader culture within society. Research reveals that the usefulness and exploitation of a given work-family policy depends on the existing work culture within the company (Højgaard, 1998). Research has illustrated a close relation between supervisor’s supportiveness and family friendliness in the workplace (Breugh & Frye, 2008; Lewis, 2001; Secret & Sprang, 2001). Workers may not always take up on the company’s chances for flextime, parental leave or other ‘family-friendly’ policies. Previous research suggests a fissure between the resources available for balancing work and family life and employee’s utilization of those resources (Hochschild, 1997; Still & Strang, 2003). This raises the issue about the interplay between equal rights and family friendly policies, work culture and external factors such as increased labour market competition. Blair-Loy and Wharton (2004) found that the groups of people, mostly women with childcare responsibilities, in most dire need of family-friendly measures are not likely to use those because of the intense demands and responsibilities of the job: “The official availability of corporate work-family policies alone is insufficient to alter these patterns” (p. 261). This means that there are stronger forces pulling in the opposite direction, away from the family friendliness emphasis.

Lyness and Kropf (2005) have stressed the importance of looking at the issue of work-family reconciliation in context with the state of affairs concerning equal rights between men and women. The state of equal rights affairs in a given society can give some indication of how successfully a family friendly policy will be received. Also, the effects of organizational changes, including family-friendly policies, are “negligible without far wider cultural changes within organizations and in wider society” (Smithson & Stokoe, 2005, p. 165).

At the current time, the female employment rate is extraordinarily high in Iceland, nearly 80% among the whole population; among the age group 25–54 it is 85%, 95% for men respectively (Statistics Iceland, 2007b) and the working hours of women are continuously

increasing, especially that of women with two or more children (Statistics Iceland, 2004, p. 44, table 44). The average working hours for women in 2007 were 36 hours per week, 47 hours for men (Statistics Iceland, 2007b). This is the case even though one fourth of the women work part-time (Moss & Kamerman, 2009). Part-time work is defined as between 1–34 hours in paid labour per week (Statistics Iceland, 2004). Icelandic women's average weekly working hours are similar to Norwegian men's: 36 and 37 respectively (Statistics Iceland, 2007b; Statistics Norway, 2007). Fertility rates are high in Iceland: 2.1 children per woman (Statistics Iceland, 2007c) which is among the highest in Europe (Moss & Korintus, 2008). Extant research indicates that the tension between work life and family life is particularly conspicuous in Iceland (Einarsdóttir, 1998; Fridriksdóttir, 2004; Hannesdóttir, 2003; Júlíusdóttir, 1993; Pétursdóttir, 2004).

The political importance of the work-life strategies is emphasized in the *Act on the equal status and equal rights of women and men* (no. 10/2008, no. 96/2000). According to the law, employers shall take the necessary measures to enable women and men to reconcile their occupational and family obligations, for example, by promoting increased flexibility in organizing work and working hours, and making it easy for them to return to work after parental leave. Moreover, employers in Iceland shall make systematic efforts to equalize the status of the sexes in the labour market (cf. Art. 13-16). Companies and institutions employing more than 25 people shall prepare a program on matters of equality or include specific provisions on gender equality in their personnel policy.

Gender is socially constructed, through social interaction, therefore we speak of 'doing gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender is something we do and think: "guided by perceptions of femininity and masculinity which become tools of orientation for our practice" (Kvande, 2007, p. 53). Masculinity is further defined by Kvande (2007), drawing on Connell's (1995) work, as "a configuration of practices *within* a system of gender relations (p. 77, authors italics). We thus do and think (practice) gender, based on what we learn to be appropriate, in a historical context.

Iceland; proclaimed by international organizations (e.g. World Economic Forum, see Hausmann, Tyson and Zahidi, 2010) and in the media (Einarsdóttir, 2010) as the most gender equal country in the world but is it so in practice? 'The aura of gender equality' describes the social process, or phenomena, in which men and women convince themselves, and the researcher, that equality reigns despite practical evidence indicating otherwise. The aura of gender equality is a concept which hosts the various manifestations of the discrepancy between practice, and a socially desirable ideal (Gyda Margrét Pétursdóttir, 2009). Mapping

the various manifestations of the aura of gender equality at the workplace and in the home, i.e. the discrepancy between practice and an ideal is the main aim of this paper.

Iceland has been described as a ‘new society’, characterized by individualism, and market friendly values, e.g. a belief in entrepreneurship and the benefit of increased freedom for business. The liberal Icelandic political context is typically characterised by the resentment of central authority and government (Ólafsson, 2003). In the autumn of 2008, the Icelandic banks collapsed. The Icelandic authorities sought financial aid from the International Monetary Fund. Ólafsson (2008) in an article ironically titled *The Icelandic economic miracle: From prosperity to liberalism and financial crisis* analyses what brought about the crisis. He maintains that following the privatization of the Icelandic banks in 2003, as part of the EEA agreement and strongly influenced by individual politicians, a surge of ‘speculative capitalism’ fuelled by ‘radical liberalism’, also known as neo-liberalism, and unrestrained market economy swept the country. Before that time Iceland was a prosperous country, the standard of living was comparable to the other Nordic countries even though Icelanders have always had to work longer hours to enjoy a comparable living standard, according to Ólafsson. Most of the data presented here were collected at the height of the economic boom. By exploring this particular period I am able to illuminate some of the ideological forces shaping gender relations, work cultures and family responsibility during the economic boom and connecting them to the aura of gender equality.

### **Hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity**

The concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ was put forth and defined by R. W. Connell in 1982 (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Masculinity, or masculinities, is defined by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) in the following manner:

Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting. (p. 836)

Masculinity is therefore a social construction. Hegemony is defined as “an idea that embeds certain notions of consent and participation by the subaltern group” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 841). Hegemonic masculinity is thus defined as “the incorporation of such masculinities [e.g. physical disability, class inequality] into a functioning gender order rather than by active oppression in the form of discredit or violence” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848); this also applies to women: “To sustain a given pattern of

hegemony requires the policing of men as well as the exclusion or discrediting of women” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 844). Hegemonic masculinity is therefore conceptualized as a hierarchy and is depended on existing gender relations in a given context:

So hegemonic masculinity can contain at the same time, quite consistently, openings towards domesticity and openings towards violence, towards misogyny and towards heterosexual attraction.... The most important feature of contemporary hegemonic masculinity is that it is heterosexual, being closely connected to the institution of marriage. (Connell, 1987, p. 186)

Hegemonic masculinity is both a historical construction and reconstruction (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 846), and is intertwined with social, political, economic and interpersonal power relations. Let’s explore this a bit further with an empirical example, Stefánsson (2008) compared data from The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) carried out in 2002 to a replication of the ISSP survey carried out in Iceland in 2005. He found that almost 66% (men and women) either agreed or strongly agreed to the statement ‘a job is all right, but what most women really want is a home and children’. Interestingly, Iceland scored the highest, among the 18 nations, in the measurement and similarly 19% either agreed or strongly agreed to the statement ‘a man’s job is to earn money; a woman’s job is to look after the home and family’, placing Iceland near the middle among the nations surveyed. These are interesting results in a society with such a high percentage of women in the labour market. Stefánsson (2008) says that the measurement is an indication of how ideologically prevalent traditional stereotypes about men and women (i.e. certain gender relations) are in a given society. Despite women’s widespread labour market participation, both men and women feel that the public sphere of paid labour is primarily the men’s domain.

Hegemonic masculinity is based on the existence of women and marginalized groups of men, as mentioned earlier. There is, however, “no femininity that is hegemonic in the sense that the dominant form of masculinity is hegemonic among men” (Connell, 1987, p. 183). ‘Emphasized femininity’ is a concept which comes from Connell’s (1987) book *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*. Connell does not elaborate extensively on the concept, but if the sum of his writing is considered the following definition emerges:

... subordination of women to men that provides an essential basis for differentiation. One form is defined around compliance with this subordination and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men... [183]. There is likely to be a kind of ‘fit’ between hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. What it does imply is the maintenance of practices that institutionalize men’s dominance over women [185] ... The option of compliance is central to the

pattern of [emphasized] femininity which is given most cultural and ideological support at present [187]... it is promoted in mass media and marketing with an insistence and on a scale far beyond that found for any form of masculinity [187]... To call this pattern 'emphasized femininity' is also to make a point about how the cultural package is used in interpersonal relationships. [188]... Central to the maintenance of emphasized femininity is practice that prevents other models of femininity gaining cultural articulation. [188]. (pp. 183, 185, 187, 188)

Compliance is an important aspect of the concept of emphasized femininity. Women to a certain degree comply; this compliance is maintained and promoted at the cultural and ideological level, through mass media and marketing, affecting interpersonal relationships between men and women. Connell (1987) defines the ideological aspects of femininity in the following manner:

The ideological representations of femininity draw on, but do not necessarily correspond to, actual femininities as they are lived. What most women support is not necessarily what they are. (p. 186)

Emphasized femininity furthermore prevents other models of femininity from gaining cultural articulation. Connell (1987) says that emphasized femininity is performed especially to men and not to other women because "the concentration of social power in the hands of men leaves limited scope for women to construct institutionalized power relationships over other women" (p. 187). This means there is no hegemonic femininity, and hegemonic masculinity is not possible without emphasized femininity and subordinated masculinities.

### **Qualitative enquiry in three sectors**

The results presented draw on an extensive qualitative enquiry. The participants work in three different – public and private – sectors in the labour market: The City of Reykjavík workplaces, i.e. workplaces run by the municipality, software firms and fast-food companies (fast-food restaurants, a gas station and a supermarket). Employed in the City's workplaces are both professionals and 'unskilled' service workers. The software firms employ mostly highly skilled professionals and social prestige is high. The fast-food companies employ mostly 'unskilled' service workers and social prestige is low. The City of Reykjavík workplaces are interesting venues to explore compromising between work and family life. This is the sector in the labour market where external conditions, i.e. policies, concerning equality and family friendliness are most favourable. In 1994, a full time equality officer was appointed to the City of Reykjavik, the first full time equality officer employed in Iceland. Following her appointment an equal opportunities and family friendly policy was put

together. The issue of family friendliness is therefore framed within equal rights for women and men. The other sectors, the software firms and fast-food companies, belong to the private sector of the economy where external conditions are not as favourable.

The requirements I had posed from the beginning of data gathering – diverse workplaces in different sectors and parents with different educational levels – were a guiding factor in selecting workplaces and interviewees. In line with Patton's (1990) definition, I chose the workplaces and interviewees by purposeful sampling. The goal was to observe workplaces and interview people who could shed a light on work cultures, gender relations and family responsibility in all their diversity.

I was in the field collecting data between January 2005 and February 2006. Data from other research projects from 2003 (Einarsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2004a, 2004b; Pétursdóttir, 2004, 2005) were also used for the analysis. Participant observation was carried out in 11 workplaces. At the beginning of the research process I visited each workplace and stayed on average three hours at each. The nature of my visits was different in different workplaces. In some I was allowed to roam around freely while in others I was given a guided tour by the manager, introduced to some or most employees and afterwards I could place myself in the workplace where I had sensed I would have the best overview of the employees and the operation. In one workplace I was given a guided tour but not allowed to walk around by myself. If participant observation is seen as a continuum my observational field work was very much at the observation end. Best described as 'observer as participant' (Junker, 1960 cited in Neuman, 2006).

A total of 48 semi-structured qualitative interviews with 24 men and 24 women (managers and employees) were conducted, most often in the workplaces; the exception being the fast-food workers who were interviewed in their homes. The interviews lasted on average one and half hours. Twelve women and 11 men who work for the municipality were interviewed; eleven men and eight women working in software firms; and four women and two men working in fast food restaurants, a gas station and a supermarket. The interviewees had an average of 2.1 children from two months to 18 years old. Average age of my interviewees is 38 years (managers on average 43 years old, employees on average 36 years old). The majority, 39 (21 men and 18 women) of the participants are married or cohabiting in a heterosexual relationship. Two men and six women are single parents. Many of the interviewees, 34, had some sort of a formal education (18 men and 16 women), 14 had no formal education (six men and eight women). Of the 48 people interviewed, women were paid more than their male spouses on four occasions (three interviewees, one spouse of an



interviewee), for the remaining married or cohabiting interviewees it was the male spouse who received a higher salary.

When describing the participants I follow DeVault's (1991) precedence. She wanted to present her readers with some information about her participants which might aid them in interpreting the citations but her main focus was on telling a collective tale, what the participants have in common. I follow DeVault's precedence; when describing my participants I provide very little identifying detail. This is also done to honour their anonymity. Iceland is a very small society with 320 thousand inhabitants; I feel by giving as little detail about my participants as possible I am better able to hide their identities. For the same reason I give as little detail as possible about the different workplaces and the actual work being carried out within them. This surely affects the analysis. A thicker description of what the work actually entails would allow for a more nuanced analysis, especially concerning masculinized and feminized work practices. In weighing my options I opted for my participants' anonymity.

The interviews were semi structured; interview guides, partly separate for managers and employees, were prepared before going into the field. Employees were asked several questions divided into separate themes, these are: The work (describe your work, co-worker and gender relations); the time (time devoted to work); family-friendly policies (identify available policies, family life, division of domestic labour, and childcare). In addition, managers were asked about available gender equality and family friendly policies and to describe the workplace and work activities. Interviews were digitally recorded on to a laptop and transcribed.

The data was coded for recurring themes and also diverging themes. After I detected the common themes, I also wanted to distinguish between different hues within each theme to look for commonalities and differences. The approach has some similarities to grounded theory which has been defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as the process of discovering a theory in qualitative data, i.e. 'generating a theory' grounded in the data. By focusing on the similarities I was able to focus on a micro level theory that came alive in the data. At the same time it is important to spot the differences. Strauss and Corbin (1998) define the differences as 'dimensions' within concepts or themes. I also relied on 'formal data structure analysis' as defined by Gustavsson (1996). His approach to data analysis relies on formulating reasonable interpretations based on the data and then testing those in the qualitative data set. I formulated several interpretations which I then tested on my material by going back to the original interviews and exploring if those formulations were plausible. I formulated reasonable

interpretations based on a theme that became relevant in one interview and then tested if the same formulations applied in other interviews. The interpretations that could explain the most were used in the analysis and writing. Gustavsson's approach to data analysis is a sort of a reflexive process, travelling between theories or interpretations and the qualitative data – a hybrid between induction and deduction (Gustavsson, 1996).

Last but not least I use discourse analysis which, according to Kvale (1996), is not a method per se (like grounded theory or formal data structure analysis) but a way to approach the interview material. I use discourse analysis to explore the underlying meaning of certain words and statements and analyse the ways in which they reflect a particular system of knowledge or ideas. Discourse analysis provides us with a critical awareness of our otherwise taken-for-granted everyday knowledge (Gill, 2000).

### **Within the aura of gender equality**

#### *At work*

At the City of Reykjavík, only one of six workplaces researched had added some equal rights aims to its personnel policy. The most common explanation given for a lack of policy by the managers interviewed was that the position the person held was new or that the person holding the position was new at the job. A male manager who had held the particular position for a few months said: "I just arrived". During that time, however, he had optimised several issues in the business. He was also not foreign to the business conducted because earlier he had managed a comparable workplace for the City of Reykjavík. Another common explanation given was that it was on the agenda to hire someone to do the job. This study thus indicates that putting together an equal rights policy is not a priority among the managers interviewed despite a very clear City policy.

Now let's turn to the family friendliness, overall it could be stated that the men working for the City of Reykjavík who took part in the research have a complicated relationship with family friendliness, whether it was stated explicitly or inexplicitly. They felt they needed to rationalise their standing both to themselves and others whether or not they use the available flexibility. It appears, especially among those with a university degree, that it was not suitable for men to work for the City and they felt they needed to rationalise why they were not working in the private sector of the labour market. Men with university degrees who work in the private sector receive on average a 45% higher pay than those with the same education who work in the public sector (Jónsdóttir et al. 2006, p. 29). This relates to Connell's hegemonic masculinity; money is one form of power.

Those who use the available family friendliness, mostly in the form of flexitime, highlight their roles as family men and their opposition towards the speed and the inhuman values of the private sector. Men who are sceptical about the family friendliness policies often have a positive outlook toward the private sector and think that the family friendliness is a sign of poor management or a sign of a lack of seriousness in the work. In recent years, some work formerly done by the City's employees has been outsourced and City institutions have been turned into private companies. As such, those doing the work do not enjoy the rights enjoyed by City's employees, a fact presented by the Equal opportunities officer. This development is one aspect of privatization which is strongly influenced by neo-liberalism (Pusey, 1991; Riccucci, 2001, cited in Connell, 2006), and typical, mostly blue collar, male work is being privatized more than typical female work. It is therefore worth reflecting on the connections between privatization and the respect a particular job holds. Men are more likely to feel content working for someone in the private sector of the economy even though the nature of the work is still the same as before because working in the private sector is more prestigious than working as a City employee. This particular development often leads to a certain loss of family friendliness; flexibility is no longer available.

The family friendliness, most often in the form of flexitime of some sorts, was often based on certain conditions, overtly or covertly expressed by management and co-workers. For women working within a tight schedule, decided largely in advance, it was difficult to reconcile family life and work. A female employee, professional, said:

There is this understanding that you attend the meetings for the parents at your children's school if you organize it yourself.

The woman felt she enjoyed a certain degree of "*understanding*" and flexibility but was nevertheless solely responsible for organizing her absences within the tight schedule she was supposed to uphold, and which often meant that she was not able to attend events at the school scheduled on a short notice. So the resources for reconciling family life and paid employment are not aimed at those employees, majority of which are women with more caring responsibilities than men, who are in jobs demanding high degrees of attendance and who enjoy little autonomy due to the nature of their work (see also Acker, 2006).

A somewhat different pattern emerged in the fast-food companies and software firms, where no formal equal rights or family policies were in place. Some of the managers considered it "foolish" to have to put together an equal rights policy. A manager in a software firm employing around twenty people said:

There is no such policy available, but then again, ah, we try to keep it such that everyone has equal rights... I think that this is just given, that women and men are equal and in some ways I find it foolish to have to put together an equal rights policy in a company where it is obvious that equally qualified individuals will receive equally, so, anyway I hope the employees see it the same way.

He says they “try to keep it such” and he talks about ‘equally qualified individuals who receive equally’. Gathered from the interviews with the employees, both men and women, it became clear that this was not the case. Women were software service workers, despite having sought employment in programming which pays more and is considered more prestigious and none of the women employed had been offered a share in the company as was the norm among the men.

Informal family policies were in place in one form or another, a manager in a software firm saw the informal family policy implicitly as a means to provide the workers with “freedom to work”, he said when asked about family policy:

We have not been organizing trips to summer camp [for employees’ children] or something of that nature, we’ve talked about it but it hasn’t been organized... [The employees] have the freedom to work, but in return we expect them to perform and if they can’t there is very little we can do, and in fact then we don’t see the need for them, but I think people appreciate this, they get a certain amount of freedom but instead we place certain demands on them.

Part of this “freedom to work” is the idea to provide 24 hours care and amusement for the employees’ children during the summer time, i.e. “summer camp”. Duty to work, despite family obligations, is therefore framed as freedom *to* work; encumbrance becomes freedom in the manager’s formulation.

Another male employee saw an informal family policy as a means to provide workers with the right hardware and software so they could, if children were sick or if there was impassability due to excess amounts of snow, “*do part of their work from home*”, another way of providing “freedom to work” despite unexpected situations. Children are therefore not to be a liability to their working parents and in some instances they are not even mentioned. I asked a female manager about family policy, she said: “*We show rather much regard for people’s private lives, whether they have dogs or spouses.*” This meant that employees were free to take extended lunch breaks to go to the gym, for example. But as within the other software firms researched and the City of Reykjavík workplaces, and other female dominated work within the fast-food companies (see also Rafnsdóttir, 1995; Rafnsdóttir &

Sigurvinsdóttir, 2007) women were concentrated in jobs where attendance was needed, to be there to answer the phone and assist customers, but men were concentrated in jobs where more flexibility was available. Men thus have more mobility which might mean increased work quality, e.g. easier access to information in the workplace which might enhance their status within the firm. This issue was not framed as such; it was in women's own hands to find a substitute if they had to take extended lunch breaks or leave early. One female manager said about a female employee having to leave early: "*She just takes care of it and I'm not aware of that it has created any problems.*" The managers' lack of awareness does not mean that it has not created problems; she might not have been informed. If an issue is framed as an issue individuals have to take care of themselves, where there is no explicit company policy, they are not likely to seek the managers' help if they know that this will affect their merit within the company.

Also of interest is the absence of children in the managers' discourse on families as consisting of spouses and dogs. The manager has a child but it seems that she does not want to make herself vulnerable within the company because of it. This is what Hochschild (1989, cited in Halford & Leonard, 2001, p. 78) terms as 'cultural cover up'; women who deny that children affect their work lives. The manager is already under attack from male employees who question her leadership skills mostly because she is a woman, so she is very determined to show herself as a competent leader despite having become a mother and not to be shown giving herself, or other women, any special treatment because of it. She works mostly with young men, most have spouses and some have dogs. She gives them ample amounts of flexibility. During my field visits one of them was allowed to bring his dog to work; a small vociferous creature which barked every time a stranger entered the room. The dog had not been 'toilet trained' so a mat was on the floor for the dog to urinate on.

Acker<sup>1</sup> says that in the United States there is a reluctance to grant diverse groups, because of race and gender, what has been framed as 'special treatment'. Therefore issues like compromising between family life and work have become issues about balance between work and private life. Because of this reframing of family life issues as private life issue, young men without any family responsibility are the group who enjoys the most flexibility in the labour market. They are the ones who use it to pursue their leisure interests because their positions in the labour market is much more secure than women's who shoulder the family responsibility and need the flexibility but know that it will harm their position in the labour

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1 Acker's lecture was given at a PhD seminar, *Flexible work and the work-life balance*, at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology on April 26th 2006.

market if they make use of it. Another strand of the same trend is the ‘life course’ emphasis in leave policies. What it means is that entitlement (leave from paid employment etc.) is given as an individual right. Men or women having children have the same entitlements as other workers; a certain amount of leave is available to each worker, independent of their diverse family situations (see for example Deven and Merla, 2012).

It is hard to miss the individualistic neo-liberal connotations which has been “characterized by the ‘death of society’ and the rise of ‘individuals’” (B. Davies, Browne, Gannon, Honan, & Somerville, 2005, p. 344); a separation of the private sphere of families and the public sphere of market and the state (Borchorst, 1999; cited in Weigt, 2006) where gender is not ‘an issue’ only individual preferences (Connell, 2006). Thus, every man for himself, there is no space for dependent individuals (children), but leisure time companions (dogs) are allowed, making the personal an *a*political issue to be dealt with by individuals, not society at large.

#### *At home*

The aura of gender equality is in essence a manifestation of an ideal that is to be found at work and also in the home. Most of the interviewees wanted to convince the researcher that caring for children was shared equally, here is one example:

Researcher: But regarding the children, how...

Woman: Look, the younger girl wants me to do certain things more often and some things she wants her father to do more often... equality reigns, and more often than not we both participate like with the music school, we often both attend her concerts. I more often than he does but that is only because you know, I want to, you get it? So when he wants to go, and he has, gives himself the time to go with her then I also attend, I don’t want to miss it, we both go, you get it?

The woman wants to convince me that “equality reigns” as expressed with: “You get it?” She attends the concerts more often than her husband does because she wants to – it is her choice. And the child wants her to do certain things, as if the child came into this world with clear ideas about what to expect from mother and what to expect from father, i.e. it is not something that the woman has control over.

Many of the men believe they share the child care equally with their spouses. One of the men put it like this: “Regarding the boy, we share his care completely equally and all things concerning him, therefore it works out very well.” In the interview he talked about going to

the gym three mornings a week, and those mornings his wife takes the child to the child care centre. Asked more thoroughly about the division of child care and working hours, he added:

At the end of the day, just before the end of the working day, we decide who will pick up the champ. We have two cars, which I think is necessary; therefore it is very flexible and gives you freedom to have two cars and often, sometimes, I have to work late, to finish something then I can just stay longer and she just takes her own car, therefore it is very nice.

In the former quote he says: “We share his care completely equally and all things concerning him.” A closer examination reveals a different pattern. His wife takes the child to the child care centre more often and picks him up more frequently than he does because: “I have to work late, to finish something.” Besides working late some days, the man also has a second seasonal job. What he believes is that: “We share his care completely equally and all things concerning him” even if in reality a different pattern is revealed. What the man believes draws attention to research from the United States on how images of gender are pictorially constructed in sociology textbooks. In the conclusion, the authors suggest that: “[S]tudents begin to complain that the material is “only about women” when the actual share is about half.” The authors call this the “perceptual issue” (Ferree & Hall, 1990, p. 529).

Parents’ perception of child care is not directly transferable to results in a study on how images of gender are pictorially constructed, but it is tempting to look at those results in context. The man perceives that he and his wife share the child care “completely equally”, but in reality she is more available to the child than he is. Students perceive that material is “only about women” when in reality it is equally balanced between men and women. The man’s perception of equality might have been formed in his upbringing. For a person growing up almost in the sole care of his mother because the father is working from dawn till dusk, it might seem to be a lot to take a child to child care two days a week and pick him up occasionally – as it might seem that material is only about women if one is not used to seeing images of women in textbooks. In an informal talk after the formal interview, the man talked about his father. I asked him, rather casually, if he considers himself the typical Icelander, working two jobs. He says “in part” and adds that his father is a typical Icelander, a manual worker, working ten to twelve hours a day but still earning less than he (the interviewee) earns for his regular eight hours a day. Reading between the lines suggests that the man did not enjoy his father’s presence or physical care as much as his mother’s in his childhood – a pattern he does not want to repeat with his son. He perceives that he is sharing equally with his spouse and therefore doing a better job than his own father, both as a caregiver and a

breadwinner (only has to work eight hours a day to earn more than his father earns working twelve hours a day) and therefore feels that he is in a hegemonic position towards his father. The man's intentions are good – to care equally - but stronger forces intervene, as he works overtime at his regular job and has a second seasonal job.

### **Summation and concluding remarks**

The idea of the freely choosing individual seeks some of its legitimation from the neo-liberal ideology. This ideology affected Icelandic politics and the financial system in general, and more specifically equal rights and family friendly policies both in the private and public sectors of the economy. The idea of the freely choosing individual also became the dominant hegemonic ideology, characterized by the death of society and rise of the individual, thus shaping hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. Women project the image of being independent and as equal to men, even if they do more child care than men. The men believe or perceive the situation as being that of equal sharing. Both men and women are within the socially desirable aura of gender equality which is a manifestation of an ideal situation that clashes with the 'real'. This clash is inevitable because practice is different from ideal perceptions. The aura of gender equality works as a filter, i.e. an aura through which they verbalise their share of the work. They want to believe they are doing equal amounts, or their fair share, even if in practice a different picture is revealed. They therefore 'pay lip service' to equality. Paying lip service to equality means that they use the available common language to convince themselves, and the researcher, that they are in fact doing equal amounts, or their fair share, of child care. And if they are not they have manifold explanations or justifications at hand – justifications which they use to stay within the aura of gender equality.

The gendered division of labour and how women's work is ascribed lesser value in the public sphere affects gendered power relations in both the private sphere of the home and the public sphere of paid labour. The issue of power affects perception. Men are in a more powerful position in the labour market than women when it comes to financial rewards. This also gives them more leverage in the home when it comes to child care – they are breadwinners in a model where women are 'junior partners' because of women's lower salaries and subordinated positions in the labour market. Men's hegemonic status, in the workplace and at home, is thus ensured by women's compliance which is based on their limited access to social and financial power in the public and private spheres.



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Examining the processes of economic liberalization in Russia and Iceland, Johnson explains how the bait-and-switch male dominance came about. In both countries, liberalization in the 1990s created a wheeling-and-dealing economy in which male-dominated elites rewarded those inside their networks with spoils of money and power. 2009. *Within the Aura of Gender Equality: Icelandic Work Cultures, Gender Relations and Family Responsibility*. Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Political Science, University of Iceland. Google Scholar.

Polenina, S. V. 2003. In short, it is that gender equality does not come about of its own accord. It requires the collective action and solidarity of women human rights defenders, political will, and tools such as legislation, gender budgeting and quotas. Iceland, despite being an island, is not isolated from progress towards gender equality. As such, the Icelandic case is nothing exceptional. It has been influenced by cultural, political, religious, social, academic and economic currents that have washed ashore and been domestically cultivated and created. There is a gender pay gap for work of equal value despite the existence of a law on equal pay since 1961. Icelandic women have been protesting against this imbalance by going on general strike since 1975. Image: Statistics Iceland. Iceland starts gender equality lessons in preschool. The country has not just one, but three, laws protecting women at work. Sick of media, treating women as sex objects? That doesn't fly in Iceland, where a law bans gender discriminatory advertising. Plus, the country was the first to ban strip clubs for feminist reasons. This law includes information on gender equality for government and businesses to follow. Within the law there are nine defined areas of gender discrimination. It identifies differences between indirect and direct gender discrimination, acknowledges gaps in wages, and recognizes that gender-based violence is detrimental to society. The law draws out a roadmap to achieving gender equality, even including language on changing negative gender stereotypes. Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. There has been progress over the last decades: More girls are going to school, fewer girls are forced into early marriage, more women are serving in parliament and positions of leadership, and laws are being reformed to advance gender equality. Women's unpaid care work has increased significantly as a result of school closures and the increased needs of older people. Women are also harder hit by the economic impacts of COVID-19, as they disproportionately work in insecure labour markets. Nearly 60 per cent of women work in the informal economy, which puts them at greater risk of falling into poverty. What is the difference between gender equity, gender equality and women's empowerment? Gender equity is the process of being fair to women and men. Within the context of population and development programmes, gender equality is critical because it will enable women and men to make decisions that impact more positively on their own sexual and reproductive health as well as that of their spouses and families. Equally, however, men have responsibilities in regard to child health and to their own and their partners' sexual and reproductive health. Addressing these rights and responsibilities entails recognizing men's specific health problems, as well as their needs and the conditions that shape them.