

**GENDER IN ICELAND:
INTERGENERATIONAL APPROACH TO ACHIEVING EQUALITY**

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My idea for the ethnographic encounters project came to me in the shower – surrounded by dozens of naked Icelandic women in the locker room at the local baths. As a woman who had never been nude in front of so many other people, I was amazed by Icelandic women’s natural comfort with nudity. Young children, mothers, and elderly women all washed themselves, witnessing the beautiful spectrum of female bodies around them. I felt empowered because I did not need to feel ashamed about my body, as this nudity was natural for most girls growing up in Iceland. This experience engaged my interest in gender in Icelandic society, especially in how children come to understand gender roles, both through societal forces and parental models.

How are conceptions of gender produced, reinforced, and reformed across generations in Iceland? This project aims to answer this question, by merging feminist theory with theories on the processes that allow gendered meanings to pass through generations. I would like to propose that *ontogeny* be the epistemological focus of gender studies. Ontogeny can be defined as the process of coming into being, of human development and ageing (Robertson 1996: 591). By bringing humans' social development back to the centre of feminist studies, I aim to make sense of the way in which gendered understandings are taught to children by their parents and society, but also on how meanings are reformed by children's reinterpretations, leading to greater reforms towards gender equality. Gender roles, which are often attributed to biological differences, are in fact socially constructed and reproduced through intergenerational transference (Robertson 1996: 594). Therefore, the social relations between parent and child are critical to understanding the reasons why women are being suppressed and the reasons why inequality still exists in the country with the highest rating of gender equality in the world (Gender Revolution 2017: 28).

METHODOLOGY

I was connected to an Icelandic host family through a mutual friend, and they graciously welcomed me into their home for two weeks. With the help of my host family, it was quite easy to make connections with local Icelanders, as Iceland has a population of only 330,000 people, fostering tight knit circles of families and friends. I conducted some participant observation in the host family's home, however I can only make broad generalisations about their behaviour in order to honour their trust and hospitality. The majority of my analysis is based on informal interviews with other Icelandic people I met. I interviewed six women and one man of varying ages in their homes and workplaces, settings I chose specifically because they provided me with a more complete picture of their lives. Because I was interested in how meanings of gender are transferred between generations, I included parents' and children's perspectives.¹ All children were interviewed separately from their parents, to allow them to respond confidentially and honestly. These interviews not only provided insight on the role of parents in influencing notions of gender, but also contributed to a greater historical and cultural context through which to study the production of gendered conceptions.

PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION OF GENDERED MEANINGS

Gendered meanings are infused into all aspects of society—in the way women and men dress, the language parents use to speak to their children, the influence of sports in creating role models for children, and representations in media and pop-culture—teaching boys and girls their appropriate roles and behaviours. Whereas the typical upbringing of boys nurtures a sense of individuality and agency, the expectation of girls to eventually fulfil a motherly role defines them in their interdependence with others, forming the basis of traditional gender roles (Rosaldo & Lamphere 1974: 44). Because humans are social beings, their ways of learning about gender are social as well (Toren 2008: 108). I would like to distinguish between two types of models that influence children's conceptions of gender—societal and parental models. This distinction helps categorise information and explain the origin and reinforcement of gendered understandings.

¹All of the 'children' interviewed were above the age of 18.

However, it should be noted that societal models and parental models are deeply intertwined and mutually constitutive and therefore should be considered in relation to each other.

Societal Models

Societal models of gender refer to the influence of history, sports, schools, governments, and churches in shaping citizen's understandings of gender. According to Durkheim's social theory, social phenomena are external forces acting on the individual (2013: 39). He states that 'law is enshrined in legal codes... fashions are preserved in dress, taste in works of art', which emphasizes the external nature of social facts and their domination over individual behaviour (*ibid.*).

In Iceland, many societal factors allow Iceland to appear to live up to its ranking as the most gender equal country in the world. Iceland has a long history of feminism, which many subjects spoke about with pride to explain Iceland's forward-thinking attitude towards gender equality. During the early settlement period from 875-930, women had the right to claim land and therefore had sovereignty over themselves, which women cited as one of the reasons they are more affirmative and outspoken in their society today. In 1975, the women's strike was a defining moment in the feminist movement, as almost every woman in Icelandic society refused to cook, clean, work, or take care of children. This demonstrated the importance of women's roles in society and demanded attention for equal treatment and pay. Many subjects also spoke proudly about Iceland having the world's first democratically directly-elected female president, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir in 1980, and the world's first openly lesbian head of state, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir in 2009.

The history of political activism has greatly influenced government legislation enforcing measures toward gender equality. Recently, the government proposed a law to require companies to prove that they pay men and women equally for the same work (Chappell, 2017). Legislation for equal paid maternity and paternity leave is also an important part of dismantling women's roles as the sole caregivers for children and re-emphasizes the importance of men as fathers. In Iceland, the

child is entitled to a total of 9 months with her parents—the mother gets 3 months paid leave, the father gets 3 months, and then they choose between them who should take the last 3 months. It can impact many families on a personal level, as fathers are able to spend personal time with their babies and women are able to return to the workplace. This helps to dispel the idea that mothers are ‘natural’ caregivers and should be confined to the domestic sphere. The naturalisation of women’s social roles (taking care of children) based on their biological functions (lactating/gestation) is one of the main problems posed by feminist anthropologists (Rosaldo & Lamphere 1974: 4). By showing that fathers have an equal responsibility to care for their children, this naturalisation is challenged, thereby allowing men to have more intimate relationships with their children and women to excel in the workplace. This will be explained more in the *Parental Models* section; however, it shows that systemic changes can have a major impact on the way parents allocate roles privately.

Sports teams also shape the way young children think about gender. One woman told me her son's male basketball coach is committed to deconstructing the gendered phrase ‘to throw like a girl’. He invites one of the best female players from the university to teach the young boys how to do tricks and shoot, to show them that throwing like a girl defines them as good players. By providing an example of a strong woman to young boys, they learn to respect and admire the capabilities of women, while also rejecting gendered language that suggests their inferiority. She emphasises the importance of these greater social influences in dismantling stereotypical gendered notions, saying, 'It has to come from everywhere. It can not only come from the home, from one person. It has to come from the whole society.' All of these examples illustrate how gendered meanings are continuously being reproduced and reinforced from many facets of society. Furthermore, institutions facilitate in the transference of these meanings, as they last for decades beyond the individuals themselves (Robertson 1996: 599).

Parental Models

On a societal level, it may seem like Iceland is close to achieving perfect gender equality. However, when one examines the interpersonal relationships between people, gender roles may be interpreted very differently depending on the individual. In this section, I will look at the ways parents pass on gendered meanings to their children through both *explicit* and *implicit* teaching.²

Explicit Teaching

Explicit teaching refers to the lessons parents knowingly teach their children, through corrections in language and behaviour. One mother, Marín, tries to dismantle gender norms by teaching her sons important lessons on gender in their daily lives. When reading a sexist story, she may change the gender of the characters where she sees fit, or tell her boys that the story is pretty stupid if it consistently reinforces traditional gender roles. Their family doesn't label toys as being for boys or girls, instead calling them 'kids things', allowing for a more gender neutral approach. This is the same for the colours blue and pink; she teaches them a gender can't 'own' a colour. She expressed, 'For me it is important to raise good boys that respect women for what they are and what they can do', and these small lessons play into her children's wider understanding of what it means to be a boy or a girl. Emma's gender conscious approach to parenting is similar, as she takes the role of language into account. She tells her girls, 'you worked really hard on that' or 'you are getting really strong from gymnastics', rather than focusing on more feminised tasks such as colouring well. Despite parents' focus on these explicit lessons, most believed that their children learned much more from their role models than the words they say. As much as parents teach children the meanings they come to understand, children are also interpreting and re-evaluating these meanings through their relationships with others (Toren 2008: 106). Therefore, the effectiveness of explicit teaching is limited, as children learn much more from their parents' models.

²I have made these distinctions myself based on my field research, however I acknowledge that there are likely other psychological models explaining this explicit/implicit distinction.

Implicit Teaching

Implicit teaching is behaviour that is not taught through language or correction of behaviour, but rather by children's observation and replication of their parents' roles in the house. My subjects allocated roles differently between the mother and father in the household. This section will consider cases of inequality and equality between parents in the domestic sphere and will analyse the implications this may have on child rearing.

One of my subjects, Roshildur,³ spoke of the tension between the apparent equality of the genders on a societal level in Iceland, but the stark inequality of the genders within her own household. During the 1980's when Roshildur got married, Iceland appeared to have reached gender equality as a result of the major women's strike in 1975, the first female president in the world elected in 1980, and the acceptance of unisex fashion and women's independence. However, much of this equality did not translate into her own relationship with her husband. Her husband was a doctor and she was pursuing a literature degree. Due to the nature of his job, his work was prioritised over hers and she assumed almost all household and childcare duties. Roshildur had learned from her mother to take care of others and be a good homemaker, but she struggled in this role to be a free woman with a career and an education as well. She expressed her frustration, saying, 'I was not picking roles, I was taking them all... I was in this transition, not really moving from one to another, I was trying to do it all'.

Roshildur's 24-year-old daughter, Marinella, felt a similar pressure as her mother to take on traditional domestic roles. When she moved into an apartment with her boyfriend, she remarked that 'The way I behaved and the way [my boyfriend] behaved was exactly how my parents did [regarding] housework or cooking... I would just always do it and then get frustrated by thinking 'this is not how it should be'. It just happened.' Based on the model her mother set, it was implied that housework was the woman's job. Despite Marinella's identification as an outspoken feminist and her position in a contemporary, forward-thinking society, these implicit models still

³Name has been changed.

influenced her greatly. This conception of the woman's role in the home had persisted across generations-- being passed down from her grandmother to her mother and now to her.

Transference of gendered meanings relates directly to Toren's theory of inter-subjectivity, which states that people can only become who they are through their relations with others (Toren 2008: 109). She refers to human learning as a 'micro-historical process' because every person is a product of their past, which they then transfer onto others (*ibid.*: 107). Roshildur was concerned that she had passed too many 'feminine' traits onto her children, by always teaching them to be servants rather than be winners. Inter-subjectivity shows how the origin of gendered meanings can be extremely personal, as they are a product of our parents' personal histories (*ibid.*:107). This example directly contrasts with Durkheim's theory because it implies that gender roles are not necessarily learned by greater social facts, but rather, that they are inherited and learnt on an individual basis from parent to child. This plays into greater understandings of gender inequality because it emphasises the crucial role parents play in actively modelling equal behaviour, rather than just preaching beliefs on the equality of the sexes.

During my time in Iceland, I also saw many instances of men playing important fatherly roles in their children's lives. At the local pools on a Sunday, I saw mostly fathers spending quality time with their sons and daughters in the wave pool. After swimming, one father braided his daughter's hair, a small detail, but an important one. The tenderness and care for the child, often seen as a maternal role, was adopted by the father without fear of feminisation. Because of their young age, I could not talk to his children about their ideas on the roles a father should have, but based on my observation and broader research I can infer that these children would consider this a normal parental act, restricted neither to the mother or father. The fluidity of these parental roles is progress towards gender equality because it dismantles widely accepted gender binaries associating men with culture and strength and women with nature and child rearing (Moore 1988: 15). This once again echoes Toren's argument on the intersubjective nature of the production of meanings. Through the observation of this behaviour, children learn the potential

for flexibility in their roles as mothers or fathers, and consequently mimic this behaviour (2008: 106).

Furthermore, when parents reverse traditional roles in the household it is likely that children will make sense of these roles in relation to themselves. In many families, fathers bought groceries and cooked, while some fathers were helping their children with homework before the mothers even returned home from work. Fathers' time on paternity leave also allows them to foster a closer relationship with their baby and relieves the pressure on the mother to provide all of her energy and time to her children. By switching roles, many couples developed empathy for the stress their partner may feel in a traditional gender role, whether that be working all day or taking care of a baby full time. These models are ingrained into children's understandings of the duties of a mother and father from a very young age. If parents dismantle the myth of naturalisation, in which women are deemed to be natural caregivers due to their ability to reproduce, children will follow this example and have broader understandings of the responsibilities of parenthood (O'Brien 1981: 19).

NEGOTIATION BETWEEN CHILD AND PARENT OF GENDERED MEANINGS

Children are agents of their own learning and therefore play a role in shaping the concepts they come to understand (Ingold 2008: 113). Through this process, children also begin to transform the way their parents understand gender, a process I believe to be most important in achieving gender equality. According to Robertson, 'human lives proceed as unfolding experience and the construction of understandings, an active process of interrogation, speculation and efforts to resolve the inconsistencies between knowledge and experience' (Robertson 1996: 599). One can see this in action as children question and reject their parents' accepted notions in favour of new ones. This is where societal models and parental models collide – children challenge the meanings their parents pass onto them by proposing their own conceptions of gender, which are informed by greater societal factors (Ingold 2008: 115).

For example, Marín's son once picked out bright pink boots at the store. Although Marín teaches her son that colours do not belong to one gender or another, she warned him that some kids may tease him because they believe pink is just for girls. However, her son refused to believe that anyone would think pink is a girl's colour, because the football team Real Madrid wears pink at every away game. They bought the boots and he wears them every day, without receiving any insults from other kids. This shows how children rely both on their parents and on greater societal factors such as sports players as role models to inform their conceptions of gender. When parental attitudes towards gender come into conflict with what children learn from society and pop-culture, children begin to use these societal role models to inform their own conceptions and decisions (Ingold 2008: 117)

Marinella also expressed the importance of challenging her mother's lessons in order for society to progress towards gender equality. Her mother made her feel ashamed when she wore low tops or a lot of make-up, saying things such as, 'You are a walking candy stick for boys'. Marinella knew her mother was trying to protect her, but she wanted to push her mother to think more openly about the negative implications of 'slut-shaming' on Marinella's perception of herself. Marinella says that she now feels 'entitled to tell her [mom] what she is doing right or wrong', because this is part of the process of reforming gendered meanings and adapting them to contemporary times.

While the parent may raise the child for some time, the child may also begin to raise the parent and shape his or her conceptions of gender too. Ingold says that the process of socialisation is a two-way process, and that the 'adult experience too, especially that of raising children, can be transformative' because no one is ever done learning and reforming meanings (2008: 114). Children's rejection of their parents' meanings show that gendered understandings are mutually informed by both parents' and children's conceptions. Progress towards gender equality lies in this constant transformation of meaning—new generations continually reinterpret their parent's ideals so that they align with the cultural changes taking place. Therefore, it cannot be said that the fight for gender equality rests on one generation or another, because they are both mutually

constituting meanings of gender in their relations with one another and the greater world around them.

CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on the models that produce and re-inform children's understandings of gender in Iceland. I have argued that both societal models and parental models are equally important in influencing children's conceptions of gender, however, they serve different purposes. Societal models such as Icelandic people's shared history of feminism, progressive legislation, and gender-conscious sports teams provide the framework for important systemic level changes toward gender equality, that engage citizens' support of the feminist movement and allow mothers and fathers to reverse their roles in the household. These institutional models are significant in children's development as they provide an alternative source of knowledge to the lessons and models offered by their parents. Nevertheless, parents are in a uniquely privileged position because they are the primary models influencing children's behaviour and understandings of self. With that being said, 'Parents do not and cannot make their children into what they are or become; what parents and other adults do is structure the conditions in which the child comes to know itself and the world of people and things' (Toren 2008: 110). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the role of both societal and parental models in producing gendered notions as well as the significance of the interactions between parents and children in reforming these meanings. Furthermore, the future of gender equality rests on the willingness of governments to promote equality, parents to disassemble traditional gender roles in the household, and children to adopt and tailor the meanings of gender to the contemporary age.

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