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Barnaheill Iceland Save the Children

Presentation to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in conjunction with Barnaheill's
supplementary report to the Icelandic report on the implementation of the Convention on the
Rights of the Child

Introduction

Iceland is indeed among the most fortunate countries in the world today. Even though it is in
many ways a very difficult country to live in, mainly because of it's geographical position and
scarce resources, except for the fish in the sea, the nation survived through difficult times.
Eruptions, earthquakes, hard winters with snowfalls, ignorance, very bad housing, diseases and
hunger nearly wiped us out leaving only about 50,000 people alive around 1800. Today the
population is 265,000, still a small popula tion but the increase has been steady over the years.

Gradually we managed to improve the nation's living standard. After the second world war Iceland has gone through dramatic social changes. Changes in the mode of production or industrialization happened over a short period of time and relatively peacefully, compared to other industrialized nations. Also gradually the population started to move from the countryside to urban areas. These social changes occurred, at least partly because of developmental aid that Iceland received after the second world war. These rapid social changes affected the role of the family to a great extent but it has not been given much attention until the last few years. One of the positive result of these changes is that today we pride ourselves of living in a prosperous welfare state. In fact, according to new information from the World Bank, Iceland is among the 10 richest countries in the world today. Very few countries are in a better position than Iceland to secure the welfare of children.

In this presentation Barnaheill maintains however and will argue, that children's issues and rights have not been given the attention nor the resources that are necessary to secure the Welfare of the child. This, we believe, is the result of a long term laissez-faire attitude towards the role of the family in our country and has seriously diminished the sense of security that all children deserve and have a right to feel. Iceland should be able to secure the child's welfare and security both on a personal as well as a societal level. Unfortunately, in many respects we have failed to do so.

How has Iceland failed to secure the welfare and the security of children?

Introductory remarks. Almost two years ago I listened to a lady from Cameroon. It was during a conference held in Malta to inaugurate the United Nations Year of the Family. She described the joy in a family when a new member was born. She also described how many of these children end up on their own literally wandering around the country doing whatever they can to survive. This, she argued, was because the extended family has broken down in her country and that the nuclear family structure was weak and lacked resources to function as it should in order to secure the welfare of the child in Cameroon. The government in Cameroon did not believe that it was part of their responsibilities to give these families emotional and/or financial support.

I was very much moved by this presentation but it never occurred to me, when I first sat down, that I would find any similarities in the social situation of families and children between those very different countries.

In the following two chapters we will maintain that the Icelandic government for decades have not taken their responsibilities towards children and their families seriously and in fact not considered it to be part of their governmental responsibilities to support children and families specifically. Only in those cases when parents grossly neglect their children do authorities admit their responsibilities towards children.

There is no policy in family matters in Iceland because so far, at least, it has not been considered necessary. Unfortunately, high government officials and politicians have not recognized the effects rapid changes have had on the lives of our children.

1. The needs of the young isolated nuclear family.

How does the government intend to increase their support to families in Iceland, specifically those with young children?

Does the government intend to develop any policy in family matters?

In Iceland, as in Cameroon, the extended family played an important role in bringing up and educating our children and young people. Today, however the most common family form is the nuclear family structure. Also in Iceland a new member of a family is greatly celebrated.

However, young parents in Iceland do not get much support from the government. In fact, employed parents with young children have the longest working hours of all social groups in Iceland which inevitably puts a lot of stress on these young households. The divorce rate has also risen dramatically since the sixties. Today over 40% of marriages end with a divorce in Iceland. With long working hours, insufficient day-care system and fragmented school system

(see Barnaheill's supplementary report) the needs (for various kind) of the isolated nuclear family are not met in Iceland. It leads to the fact, as stated in our supplementary report, that strong expectations are made of children in Iceland from an early age on, namely, that they should be self-sufficient and able to take care of themselves. We would like to reiterate our earlier comment that, as it is now, working parents do not have the support needed from the state to fulfil their responsibility as parents to protect and safeguard the well-being of their children. But according to article 18 of the Convention it is the responsibility of parents and the government to ensure the necessary resources to safeguard the protection and well being of children. In that way, Icelandic governments have failed to secure the welfare of children.

With those words I am not saying that children in Cameroon and Iceland are facing the same problems. We all know that they are not. What is surprising however are similarities in social development such as changes in the family structures of these two otherwise very different countries and different populations. The reasons for the breakdown of the extended family in Cameroon were not specifically stated but probably has Cameroon, as many other countries during this century, gone through rapid social changes leaving the "old" society in a state of upheaval and dissolution. As said earlier, in both those countries neither the government, nor the municipal authorities nor the school authorities etc. have recognized or accepted those social changes and therefore they have refused to take on "new" responsibilities regarding the welfare of the children and their families.

2. What is the position of women in Iceland today and does it affect the social situation of children.

Does the government intend to develop any specific policy in order to strengthen the social position of parents and their children in order to influence the decision making process of governments and municipal authorities?

Iceland has sometimes been characterized as a matriarchal society. In our sagas there are many tales of strong women and mothers who played a central role in family decision-making process and in the survival of the extended family even when the family should be at war with another family and when to make peace. Family decisions are of course both about emotions and economics, and women could therefore play a key role in society.

These tales of strong women are probably not unique to Iceland. They seem to characterize many societies where the struggle for survival has been very hard. As said earlier children were welcomed and celebrated in our country and if they survived the first few years they were soon trained to be useful and do some proper work. The family worked together, the children as well as the adults. It meant that children were under the guidance of their elders all the time and they soon gained a sense of self-worth and independence. However most of them worked way too much for their age.

Today, the participation of women in the workforce, in Iceland, is among the highest in the world at over 80%. Fully employed women earn about 60% of men's wages. Some years back it was believed that education was the key to correct injustice. A recent study has however shown that education does not help women when it comes to income. Over 50% of students at the University of Iceland are women.

Women in Iceland do also have their children at a younger age than their sisters in the other Nordic countries and so far we produce more of them than they do. When compared to the Scandinavian countries Iceland has the highest percentage of children within the population. (See updated statistics handed out during the pre-sessional meeting) Icelandic men have the longest working hours compared to the other Nordic countries which means that most young fathers, in Iceland, do not get much opportunity to spend time with their children, especially not while they are small. This problem is compounded by the wage differentials between sexes. The highest work-force participation are among single parents, or 9 out of every 10 do have some paid work and 3/4 of them are fully employed. The highest workforce participation of fully employed women are single mothers.

The divorce rate in Iceland is about 42% today. In 1989 children of divorced parents were supported their mothers in 87% cases. Mothers in Iceland both married and single are the prime caretakers in Iceland, like in most places in the world.

All these statistics point to the fact that women's position gets even weaker as they become parents. This is not the time nor the place to discuss on length these gender differences and I wish to make it clear that we are not passing and judgements, only making obvious observations concerning gender differences in our society.

It is still a fact in Iceland, like in most societies, that women carry bigger responsibility for their children than the men. It is also still a fact in Iceland, like in most societies, that men hold most of the positions of power in our society. Even though very important exceptions have occurred the last few years like now we have, for the first time, a woman for a Mayor in our capital city Reykjavik. These different positions of men and women most likely or (almost certainly) affects the position of children in society. In other words the weak position of women and the parental role in our society is a possible explanation for why the child's position is also so weak.

It may sound contradictory to talk about matriarchal society and strong women on one hand and a weak societal position of women on the other. However, I believe this describes the position of Icelandic women pretty well and ask wether it is possible that children in Iceland suffer because of this "low" status of women.

When I met with the CRC committee I handed over updated statistics showing the resources allocated to matters concerning children. From those it was clear that issues concerning children have not been prioritized by Icelandic authorities. Possibly it is because so very few women are involved in the decision making process when it comes to allocating resources between issues in society, other matters always seem to take priority over the child's agenda.

I will make this my concluding remarks for this presentation. If there is anything else we can do for the committee do not hesitate to contact us anytime.

Reykjavik, January 5, 1996
on behalf of Barnaheill
Kristin Jónasdóttir Secretary General.

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