EU HEADLINES

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF EUROPEAN DEBATES

Give and take

Women of Iceland drop their professional and domestic responsibilities for a day to deliver a powerful message in protest of the gender-based pay gap and gender-based violence.

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Money where the mouth is

The women and non-binary people of Iceland went on strike Tuesday – even Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdóttir joined the protest, which hobbled broadcasts, transport, schools, hospitals, and shut down all but one of the country's banks, according to *El País*. Though Iceland has long been the world's leader in gender equality, the work is never done – the serious issues of gender-based violence and the pay gap persist. Despite Iceland's progress on high-level jobs, the majority of the lowest-paid workers are women. It is exacerbated for the case of immigrants, making up about 22% of the female workforce and who overall have more demanding and lower-paying jobs. Tuesday's strike was mainly organised by trade unions, to which about 90% of the country's workers belong, and marked the 48th anniversary of Iceland's first such strike in 1975. The country's 1975 strike contributed to the passing of a law the following year guaranteeing equal treatment for all genders, and there have been several more walkouts and strikes in the meantime, the latest taking place in 2018. Movements in Poland and Spain have directly credited this as inspiration for their own protests. Jakobsdóttir has made gender equality, and specifically fighting gender-based violence, a main priority of her government.

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Old cause, new tricks

Icelandic Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdóttir, who is well known for her gender equality advocacy, decided to strike alongside women and non-binary Icelanders on Tuesday. *Le Figaro* writes that even though the country ranks the highest globally on the global gender gap index, "in some professions, Icelandic women earn 21% less than men", and "more than 40% of Icelandic women" experience gender inequality because of sexual violence, according to the 2023 World Economic Forum. This is despite the fact that a law was passed in 2018 to make equal pay an obligation. While it had a "clear effect", according to the prime minister in 2021, its implementation is taking longer than originally planned and efforts are lacking. This explains the popularity of the strike; strikers' spokeswoman Gerdur Steinthorsdottir stressed that "the strike is intended to show how vital we are to the country' economy and national life." The idea to strike has spread to France, where feminist groups have replicated the initiative for International Women's Rights Day on March 8. In 2023, 48 associations joined forces with trade unions to protest and more than 150 demonstrations were organised on that day.

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No resting on laurels

In the opening speech of the Arctic Circle Assembly, held in Reykjavik on October 19, Prime Minister of Iceland Katrin Jakobsdóttir gave a fair warning that achieving the Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality at the snail's pace at which the world is moving might take up to 300 years, reports *High North News*. Pointing out the concerning trend of the "systematic erosion of basic human rights, democracy, and rule of law" even in the states considered to be mature democracies, the prime minister warned against overreliance on the successes gained and encouraged to continue the fight against inequality that is integral to a meaningful climate action. The call to action came as a harbinger of the largest women strike in Iceland since the 1970's, which took place on Tuesday. Jakobsdóttir encouraged women all over the country to drop their personal and professional responsibilities to highlight their contribution at the workplace as well as all the unpaid work related to childcare and households that traditionally falls largely on women's shoulders and goes unnoticed, in hopes that the Icelandic example would inspire headway in eliminating the gender-based pay gap and gender-based violence.

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Walking the talk

The dust over the history of the fight for gender equality has clearly not settled as the streets of Reykjavik yet again resemble October 24, 1975, when 25,000 women of Iceland went on strike to highlight the standing issue of the gender-based pay gap. Reminiscent of the first kvennafrídagurinn, or Women's Day Off, *Iceland Review* dug through the archives to find the first report on the event dating back to 1986 to reflect on how far the progress has come and what issues remain pressing today. The first protest not only brought about the first legislation on gender pay equality adopted by Althing, the parliament of Iceland, in 1976, but also marked the beginning of the United Nations Decade for Women. Four years later, Vigdis Finnbogadottir became the first woman to be elected as a president of Iceland by voters of both sexes, illustrating not only legal but also societal change. Nevertheless, in 1985 women held only nine of the sixty seats in the parliament, generally earned 65% of the national average wage paid to men and were predominantly employed in the lowest-paid professional fields. As of 2022, the unadjusted gender pay gap in Iceland was 9.1%. Thus, *Iceland Review* concludes that "history is moved when people come together and act, like so many Icelandic women did in 1975" and, perhaps, this year's strike will produce the push necessary to close the gap altogether.

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