

“Reality Bites”

Attitudes Toward Gender Equality Among Icelandic Youth

by

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Abstract

Time has been on the side of egalitarian gender attitudes in industrialized Western countries, and Iceland ranks among the highest nations in terms of economic, educational, political and health equality. Although the dominant discourses have supported the idea that gender equality has already been achieved, or will be with the aging and active participation of future generations, serious gender inequalities persist, including a wide gender pay gap and a relatively traditional division of household labour. In stark contrast with dominant discourse, this thesis supports recent research which has found that young people hold less egalitarian views on gender issues than older generations. While old-fashioned essentialist claims of natural gender remain muted in contemporary public discourse in Iceland, a new type of essentialism has emerged that combines conservative gender attitudes with neo-liberal ideas. This study documents attitudes towards gender equality among 10th grade students in Akureyri, Iceland, through a qualitative analysis of five focus group discussions: two all-boys and two all-girls groups plus one mixed group. The participants' attitudes toward the gendered division of labour within the public and the private sphere are explored in light of the possible influences of pop culture and contemporary neo-liberal and postfeminist discourses.

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Dedication

To my daughters, Fönn and Dögun.

I wish my dream of a gender equal society will be your reality

1 Gender equality attitudes during times of turbulence

Arriving in Iceland on a rainy morning, the second day of October 2008, was a strange experience. During a stop for couple of days in New York while on my way from Vancouver, the first of the three big Icelandic banks was nationalized. With astonishment, we watched via the Internet how the economy of this supposedly unbeatable although tiny nation started to melt down. This turned out to be only the ‘beginning’ of an economic collapse in Iceland that has yet to be put to an end. The purpose of my visit to Iceland was to conduct fieldwork for my graduate studies at the University of British Columbia. In having left a country that scored number one in the United Nations Development Report 2007 (World Bank, 2007), I returned to a country on the verge of national bankruptcy.

On leaving Iceland in 2007, the average personal yearly income was close to \$ 70,000, 1.6 times that of the United States (Wade, 2009:6). The standard of living was very high and the shops in Reykjavík, the capital, flooded with luxury goods. According to an international study in 2006, Icelanders were the happiest nation in the world while enjoying the least corrupt public administration (Wade, 2009). Returning to the harsh reality of ‘kreppa’ (crisis) was therefore like arriving in a different country from the one I left. I had arrived in a country which our global economical crisis had hit the hardest. People were in a state of shock and everyday life was somehow paralyzed, although ongoing. Of course, this was not really the beginning of the economic crisis in Iceland, but until that date the Icelandic government and associated institutions had closed their ears to all the bells that had been rung about pending hazards. During these first days of October the general public realized that something serious was happening which may greatly affect the living standards in Iceland for years to come.

Within a week of my arrival the second and third of the three big Icelandic banks collapsed and were taken into public ownership. Prime Minister Geir H. Haarde asked ‘God to

bless the Icelandic nation’ at a press conference held in those first days of October. Despite having a Lutheran state church, this “Bush-ian” expression was uncommon from an Icelandic politician. This awkward statement made people realize that something truly serious was going on. Certainly, the ‘kreppa’ was not a nightmare we would wake up from, but a reality. A next step was when the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was called in to organize a crisis management program. Then the currency collapsed. The unemployment rate has since been on the increase, from 1.5% in September 2008 to 8.7% in May 2009 (Vinnumalastofnun, 2009) with others taking wage cuts (Wade, 2009) and/or cuts in working hours (Vinnumalastofnun, 2009).

According to Robert Wade, a British economist who has been closely following the Icelandic ‘kreppa’, “the sovereign debt is probably well over 100 percent of the Icelandic GDP and the losses of the banks look likely to amount to some \$90 billion, although a forensic accounting has still not been conducted” (Wade, 2009:8). This economic devastation was the biting reality facing me, and my fellow Icelanders, at the time of my arrival in Iceland. It is within this milieu that I conducted the groundwork for the study, the findings of which are presented in the following pages. The purpose of my visit was to meet 10th grade students in Brekkuskóli, Akureyri in northern Iceland to discuss and document their attitudes towards gender equality in Iceland. During the ‘good’ years, the economic boom was most prominent in Reykjavík and in the greater capital area; when the crash in those first weeks of October, as a matter of course it hit the same area the hardest.

Akureyri, though, was not immune from the effects of the crisis and the general slowdown of the wheels of the society following the ‘kreppa’. The current situation did not change my plans for conducting focus groups discussion among 10th-grade students in any way, but most likely due to how people in general were occupied by the economic turbulence, it took remarkably long time to collect parental consents forms, which delayed the schedule of the

focus group discussions. During the first days of November, Brekkuskóli's principal appeared on the national television evening news and declared the school to be a "crisis-free" (kreppufrír) institution, meaning that the teachers and the staff of the school would try as hard as possible to spare the students from discussions of the current situation. Despite these intentions, the participants in the focus group discussions were aware of the current 'kreppa' and its presence was prominent throughout the discussions. During the focus groups the adolescents expressed unambiguous uncertainties about the future in these times of social breakdown. The social order as they knew it seemed to be dissolving right in front of them. Since the "kreppa" was so current when the focus group discussions were conducted, its effects still based more on speculation than actual reality, the situation probably did not influence the participants' opinions about issues of gender equality a great deal. That being said, the discussion during the focus groups mirrored the media coverage of the current situation and the students had already adopted current discourses used to find potential explanations for the national crisis.

In the fall of 2008 the Conservative Party (Sjálfstæðisflokkur/Independent) had been in government since 1991, the greater part of this time spent in in coalition with the Center Party (Framsóknarflokkur/Progressive). During these years the political arena was characterized by government deregulation and privatization of the economy, "invoking Thatcher's Britain, Regan's America, Lange's New Zealand, and even Pinochet's Chile as models" (Wade, 2009:6). The commercial banks were closely associated with the main political parties prior to privatization, and the central bank was run by three governors, one usually nominated by the Conservative Party, one by the Center Party, the third nomination up for grabs depending on the size of other parties in the parliament.

When the banks were privatized in the late 1990s and early 2000s, no foreign ownership was sought after; they were bought by associates and friends of the political officials, who had, as

Wade points out, “next to no experience of modern banking” (2009:10). He furthermore argues that the banks “quickly transformed themselves from ‘utilities’ doing retail banking to ‘utilities attached to casinos’ using their retail deposit base and the central bank’s associated pledge of lender of last resort to leverage investment/speculation both on their own account and via their linked private equity firms” (2009:15).

Before my arrival in October and the subsequent collapse of the Icelandic economy, Iceland’s three biggest banks were ranked among the 300 biggest banks in the world. As Wade points out, “The country had built up eye-popping imbalances. The current account deficit was close to the biggest in the world, at 24 percent of GDP in 2006: the stock market had shot up nine times between 2001 and 2007, a world record; and the assets of its main three banks had risen to almost nine times GDP, second in the world after Switzerland” (Wade, 2009:6). It can be argued that the imbalance delineated here would have been reason enough for the Icelandic government to pay attention to warning signs, including the glaring fact that it was “far beyond the capacity of the central bank to support the banks as lender or market maker of last resort” (Wade, 2009:6).

Although the everyday life of the Icelandic general public was in some way perceivably paralyzed during my two month stay in October and November, people began to revive themselves. During my transcribing process I watched from a distance how the general public in Iceland started a massive protest against the government. Icelanders, who have no great tradition of resistance, rallied in the streets with their pots and pans. In front of Althingi (the parliament) people knocked upon their household utensils. It was at this time that ‘The Kitchenware Revolution’ was conceived in Iceland. January witnessed masses of people who gathered everyday, aiming to disturb the operation of the parliament, demanding that the government resign. For the first time since 1949, when Iceland’s entry into NATO was objected to, police used tear gas to keep protesters back from Althingi. Icelandic society was experiencing formerly

unknown turbulence.

The demand shouted among the protesters in front of the parliament and in town squares across the country was for the resignation of the government. Following the 2007 elections, the government had been a duopoly formed by the Conservative Party and the Social Democratic Party. This was a consequence of the fact that after seventeen years in government, and a period of intensive privatization and deregulation, the public insisted that the Conservative Party be given a break from running the country. When the Kitchenware Revolution won its first victory on the 23rd of January, 2009, the government resigned (The Independent, 2009). A new minority coalition government was formed by the Social Democratic Party and the Left Green Party led by Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, the first female Prime Minister in Iceland.

New elections were called for and took place on the 25th of April, 2009. The winners of these elections, The Social Democratic Party and the Left Green Party, now form the majority government, which continues to have Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir as Prime Minister. This new government confronts the great task of ‘saving’ Iceland from bankruptcy without jeopardizing its rather strong welfare system. For that to be possible it is obvious that the prosperous population of Iceland has to adjust to a new way of living. The following argument engages this problem well:

In a sense, the problem of Iceland is not the current crisis. The problem is how to scale down from the unsustainable consumption standards of the past decade to sustainable living standards for the next decade. Icelanders have been enjoying a nearly free lunch, and at the end of the day, as Milton Friedman said, there is no free lunch (Wade, 2009:17).

Despite the temptation to turn my gaze towards the ‘kreppa’ and to view how Icelanders, once a ‘nation of prosperity’, cope with their struggles, the following study turns its focus on contemporary issues of gender equality in Iceland. I recognize that during this time of ‘kreppa’

the task of studying public attitudes towards gender equality and keeping these discourses alive may very well be more important than ever. A primary reason is that during such difficult times the economic situation tends to overshadow every other aspect of society, and the commonly heard phrase, ‘it is not the right time to focus on this now’, tends to distract people from other pressing issues and important accomplishments.

History reveals that time has been on the side of egalitarian gender attitudes for industrialized Western societies. We witness successive generations who tend to view themselves as more egalitarian than their predecessors (Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004; Loo & Thorpe, 1998; Zhang, 2006), and gender role attitudes in many industrialized societies have become increasingly egalitarian over time. In many respects, Iceland can be considered to be in the global vanguard of gender equality. For instance, the *2006 Gender Gap Index*, based on economic, educational, political and health equalities, ranked Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland in the top four slots of 115 ranked countries (Greig et al., 2006). In comparison, the United States was ranked number twenty-three on this quantitative index.

Iceland, which is one of the smallest European countries, is (or at least was) considered to be in the forefront of all nations for advancing quality of life. In the newly reported 2007 United Nations Development Report, Iceland scored number one on the development index. Iceland is a wealthy post-industrial welfare state with about 300,000 inhabitants, a GDP per capita of \$48,570, an infant mortality rate of 2.0 per 1,000 live births and a life expectancy of 81.1 years in 2005 (World Bank, 2007). By contrast, in 2005 the average GDP per capita in the European Monetary Union was \$32,098, the average infant mortality rate was 4.0, and average life expectancy was 79.7 years. In the United States, GDP per capita in 2005 was \$43,560, the infant mortality rate was 6.0, and life expectancy was 77.7 years.

In recent years, there has been growing tendency towards complacency within Icelandic

public discourse concerning everyday, institutional and political topics. Several leading politicians, journalists, academics and public figures have claimed that full equality has already been achieved, or that what little inequality remains will simply vanish over the next few years (see e.g. Helgason, 2002; Oddsson, 2004; Olafsson, 2005a). While old fashioned essentialist claims of natural gender remain muted in contemporary public discourse in Iceland, a new type of essentialism has emerged that combines conservative gender attitudes with principles of neo-liberalism.

This kind of ideological merger is finely illustrated in a series of newspaper articles by a professor of economics and business administration at the University of Iceland. Snjolfur Olafsson (2005a, 2005b) declares that the battle for gender equality has ended in Iceland with an almost complete victory. According to Olafsson, much of the remaining gender differences, including the gender pay gap, may be accounted for by the natural differences between men and women. Such 'natural differences' are supposedly reflected in the difference of choices made concerning occupations and career trajectories. Indeed, these paths consider different values placed on income to be intrinsic. Olafsson argues that demands for gender equality must be tempered by the necessity of protecting individual freedoms and therefore that attempting to eradicate the gender pay gap would be a dubious policy.

The idea of gender inequality as a result of women's personal choice neatly resolves the contradiction posed to neo-liberalism by unequal gender realities, which continue to emerge within a legal framework of formal gender equality (Crompton & Lyonette 2005; Hakim 2007). Furthermore, it depoliticizes segregated gender roles in both public and private spheres, reducing them to a matter of individual preference. Icelanders seem to have adapted to these ideas easily. In general, they are liberal when it comes to ideas about gender equality and are mindful about the reduced division of gendered labour. At the same time, Icelanders assume that the gendered

division of labour has resulted from the different aspirations of men and women (Stefansson, 2008:39).

The discourse about gendered career paths, heroic images of ‘money makers’ during the peak of the ‘Icelandic economical miracle’, was very male dominated. The term ‘outreaching Vikings’ (útrásarvíkingar) was used to describe the young businessmen conquering new markets. Today gender equality remains elusive in Iceland, with evidence of a backlash in recent years (Einarsdóttir, 2004; Hjalmsdóttir, 2007; Leiknisdóttir, 2005).

Discourses construct knowledge about particular topics or practices, and subjects are produced within discourses. Following Michel Foucault’s attempt to move away from an understanding of ‘discourse’ as a linguistic concept, I utilize the concept to refer to a group of statements, vocabularies, knowledge and representations about a particular topic at a particular historical moment (Hall, 1997:44). Discourses are therefore ways of producing knowledge that shape the everyday world and are not simply ideas. As knowledge and practice are culturally and historically specific, Foucault radically historicizes discourse, representation, knowledge and truth. Here, the subject operates within the limits of the discursive formation of a particular period and culture (Hjartardottir, 2006:18).

The prevalence of egalitarian discourses in a given society may simultaneously reflect normative evaluations of gender relations and possible future developments in gender equality. Recent research has revealed that attitudes among Icelandic adolescents towards gender equality are more negative than in past generations (Hjalmsdottir & Bjarnason, 2008). Tenth graders in 2006 were found to have more traditional ideas towards the gendered division of labour than the same cohort did in 1992 (Hjalmsdottir, 2007). These findings serve as the stimulus for the research introduced within this paper. This study is directed towards adolescents’ attitudes on gender equality in Iceland. Focus group discussions were conducted among 10th graders in

Brekkuskóli, Akureyri. My research question is concerned with how the students participating in this study perceive ongoing ideas and discourses on issues of gender equality, in relation both to everyday life and within more complex power structures.

In his essay “The Subject and Power”, Foucault claims that the primary aim of his work has not been to analyze the phenomenon of power; rather, his main goal “has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made into subjects” (Foucault, 1983:208). Foucault places the subject in relation to complex power relations:

This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects (Foucault, 1983:212).

In Foucault’s terms, the exercise of power is not only a relationship between individuals or partners, but also a way in which certain actions modify others. Power, according to Foucault exists only when it is put into action, and what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action upon an action. We are all caught up in the circulation of power, it does not arrive from a single direction from bottom up, and it is exercised rather than possessed. Importantly, in order to understand the ‘nature’ of power relations we must investigate the forms of resistance or the attempts made to dissociate these relations. Where power is exercised over free subjects, there is always resistance (Foucault, 1983:219-221).

In this circulation of power, identities are constructed. Here I follow Dawn Currie, Deirdre Kelly and Shauna Pomerantz (and certain postmodern writers) and their notion that although “identities are constantly shifting as we negotiate multiple and often contradictory roles throughout our lives, Selfhood sustains a degree of predictability in social life” (2009:2). As Currie et al. point out, this predictability is sustained in the notion of selfhood, and how we sense

“who we are” for the moment also structures “who we can become” (2009:2). The identity practices of girls and boys in Brekkuskóli may tell us not only about the current status of their attitudes towards gender equality but also about their impending future.

Adolescent attitudes toward gender equality provide important information regarding the current situation in society, and what might be expected for the future to come. Since the connection between the private and the public spheres is largely a consequence of diverse relationships within families where people manage their lives on an everyday level, the focus of this study is upon both spheres. It is difficult to make a clear division between the public and the private. Dorothy Smith points out that modern capitalism has constructed an entirely new terrain of social relations. She argues that “there has been a dialectic interchange between the narrowing local sphere assigned to women and the enlarging terrain appropriated by men of certain classes and ethnic origin and dominated by them” (1989:5). Here, following Pierre Bourdieu (2001), I refer to the private sphere as unpaid and invisible labour that cannot be utilized in someone’s favour in the public sphere, and does not produce cultural or economical capital in the same way as in other spheres. Unpaid work is usually facilitated by women and within the home, for example, in nurturing children, doing housework, and taking care of the elderly (Magnusdottir & Einarsdottir, 2005:152).

The structure of this paper follows the path from the personal to the communal, eventually embracing important ‘global’ cultural influences. Following two chapters on my conceptualization of the thesis, which consists of this introduction to the study, a discussion of methods of data generation, a short introduction to the field and a summary of the focus group dynamics, are the three main chapters. In the third chapter the participants’ attitudes toward the private sphere are analyzed. Here the focus is upon their ideas on the gendered division of housework and child care within their current homes, and also their anticipation of future

partnerships. The fourth chapter analyzes their perception of the public sphere, including the gendered division of the labour market, and between men and (a lack of) women in both public and government administration. The fifth chapter explores the participants' ideas on feminism and explores how students perceive ideas based on neo-liberalism and free choice in consistency with postfeminist culture.

As a self-identified feminist researcher, I have endeavoured to follow Smith's suggestion for doing sociology for women. She suggests a sociology for women which,

preserves the presence of the subjects as knowers and as actors. It does not transform subjects into the objects of the study or make use of conceptual devices for eliminating the active presence of the subjects. Its methods of thinking and its analytical procedure must preserve the presence of the active and experiencing subject (1989:105).

With this in mind I seek to construct the expression and experience of my participants as mindfully and as accountably as possible from a standpoint of feminist sociology. This study certainly is a project of translation in many senses of the term. My aim is not only to translate the participants' spoken words in transcribing them into text and then rendering them into English, but also to translate an emerging cultural reality in contemporary Iceland.

1.1 Gender equality in Iceland - A brief historical perspective

The current discourse on gender equality is diverse. In most countries, there is political consensus about the importance of gender equality. Nevertheless, there is no explicit consensus about the formulation of the problem, how to approach the field theoretically and practically, or what real results of policy measures can be expected (Einarsdottir & Leiknisdottir, 2007). In Iceland, along with the other Nordic countries, the gender debate has been exemplified by the 'incremental track' model, with a linear and progressive understanding of history supposedly characterized by continuing improvements for women. Gender equality is considered as a more

or less automatic process, where time will bring changes in the right direction almost naturally and by self-regulation (Einarsdottir & Leiknisdottir, 2007).

Throughout its history strong women have characterized Iceland. The early Icelandic Sagas and Nordic mythology portray independent and strong women. From the 19th century on, women have had a powerful presence in social life through a strong women's movement. Around the turn of the 20th century, Icelandic society experienced turbulent times. The old peasant society, which had been the dominant type of the social order for centuries, started to become disrupted and a modern society based on more diverse ways of working became a reality. This cultural change led to an economic transition, which was evident in changes in every aspect of everyday life, such as residency, social divisions, education, personal attitudes and prosperity. During this transition from stagnation to mobility, life expectancy increased significantly, the death rate decreased, and the Icelandic population grew in number.

In Iceland, the beginning of women's struggle for gender equality is often traced back to 1885 when Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir published her article on education and the rights of women in a widely read magazine. Bjarnhéðinsdóttir became a legendary leader for women's rights in Iceland. A few years later, under her leadership the first women's association which had improved rights for women exclusively on its agenda was established. In 1907 it became the Women's Rights Association of Iceland (Erlendsdottir, 1993). An Icelandic women's movement had been created and the struggle for gender equality had begun.

The Women's Rights Association of Iceland was a leading actor in fighting for gender equality in the first decades of the 20th century. The greatest milestone was attained in 1926, when women and men gained, unconditionally, the same rights and eligibility to vote. Any gender discrimination was eradicated from the Icelandic voting laws, in both national and municipal elections (Erlendsdottir, 1993). Since then the Women's Rights Association of Iceland

has been connected to ideas of liberal feminism formulated in the nineteenth century women's suffrage movement in the West. Its central theme is that women's subordination is rooted in their lack of access to legal rights in the public world. Women and men should be given equal opportunities in education and civil rights (Tong, 1998:2).

Although the decades from 1930 to 1960 are often referred to as 'the silent years' in the struggle for gender equality, Icelandic women were far from being silent or invisible. The struggle was ongoing. During these 'silent years', the struggle went from a focus on legal rights to the struggle for equal payment and equality within the workforce. Taxation was one of the big issues during this period. The Women's Rights Association of Iceland led the resistance against joint taxation of couples; they claimed that such regulation reinforced the ongoing division of labour, the man occupying the public sphere as the bread winner and the woman occupying the private sphere as responsible for domestic duties. The demands of the Women Association were clear: men and women should be taxed separately as independent individuals regardless of marital status (Erlendsdottir, 1993). Although some important milestones were reached, the struggle during these years was not as evident as it became in the years to come.

Whereas liberal feminists want to reform existing institutions, Marxist, Socialist and Radical feminists want to overthrow these institutions. Radical feminists claim that the patriarchal system cannot be reformed but only ripped out by its roots. They claim that it is not only the political and legal structures of patriarchy that need to be overturned for women to be liberated, but also its social and cultural institutions such as the family and the academy (Tong, 1998:2). Marxist and Socialist feminists argue that it is not possible for women to become liberated in a class-based society. Whereas both Marxist and Socialist feminists argue that it is capitalism itself that is the cause of women's oppression, Socialist feminists agree with Radical feminists that patriarchy is also the source of the subordination of women (Tong, 1998:4)

In the 1970s, the Red Stocking movement emerged in Iceland. It was a radical feminist movement, and the women within it were geared up to fight for gender equality as an issue of human rights based on an ideology of class struggle (Astgeirsdottir, 2006). The Red Stocking movement was founded on a platform of socialist feminism, rooted not only in traditional Marxist notions of class struggle but arrive at resisting the subjugation of women as well. In that sense, the movement considered how the suppression of women was not only a consequence of ongoing class struggle, but also an independent form of subjugation (Einarsdottir, 2004).

Like foreign-based Red Stocking movements, the Icelandic version struggled for changed attitudes towards and, not less importantly, among women and men; this was a struggle for human rights. The Red Stocking movement fought for gender equality, women's autonomy over their bodies, sexual and reproductive freedom, control over health and childbearing, equal educational opportunities, gender equality in the labour market, and women's freedom to be themselves. Abolition of male subjugation over women was an obvious demand. Parents should share responsibilities in bringing up their children and in domestic duties and all socialization should aim to give girls and boys the same opportunities to address future responsibilities (Helgadottir, 1996). The beginning of the Red Stocking movement was characterized by a great passion and the tasks for feminist struggle were certainly plentiful during these early years.

In 1982, a group of women decided to take greater action towards gender equality than had been previously known in Iceland. The Women's Alliance was established, and the vigorous women's movement was represented by separate women's lists of candidates in local and national elections by the turn of the 20th century (Einarsdottir & Leiknisdottir, 2007). The Women's Alliance members were strongly opposed to the Red Stocking notion of equality. To be a woman is not, per se, a safe rationale for feminist views and not at all an implicit reason for changes in society. The ideology of the new alliance was based on feminist awareness and

criticism of ongoing social processes (Astgeirsdottir, 1982). Instead of striving to become the same as men and equal to them, as the Red Stocking movement aimed to do, the “Women’s Alliance argued that women were to be granted equality on their own terms, not on men’s terms. These terms were to be rooted in and based on women’s own culture and traditions” (Bjornsdottir, 1996:119). The idea behind the party was to change and improve the society; they hoped that with their presence they could make a big step forward toward a more gender equal society. What differentiated the Women’s Alliance from other Icelandic political parties, which suddenly began to put emphasis on increasing the number of women on their ballots, was their policy and their ideology.

The existence of the Women’s Alliance had a big impact on Icelandic political discourse and on the discourse of gender equality, as well as on women’s position within the society more generally. The percentage of women in the Parliament rose from 5 percent in 1982 to 35 percent in 1999. In 1999 the Women’s Alliance merged with the then newly established Social Democratic Party. The former members of the Alliance have since been prominent within the Social Democratic Party, as well as within the Left Green Movement.

In recent years, the discourse on progressive, automatic development as a means to equality has been prominent in the Icelandic context. Leading politicians, journalists, academics and other public figures have often claimed that full equality has already been achieved, or that what little inequality remains will simply vanish in the next few years (see e.g. Helgason, 2002; Oddsson, 2004; Olafsson, 2005a, Gustavsdottir, 2007). Many of these views are also evident in everyday discourse, as represented on-line by members of the fast growing blogging community (see e.g. Hanssen, 2007, Gustavsdottir, 2009).

These ideas on the supposed achievement of gender equality are offered resistance by The Feminist Association of Iceland. The Feminist Association was founded in 2003 and is a venue

for feminists to engage in a critical dialogue on issues related to gender equality. The Association has the goal of enabling critical and feminist discussions in diverse fields of society and focuses on a broad range of issues related to women's rights, such as pornography and the demand for equal pay.

While having a history of strong women's movements and a tight legal framework, the understanding of gender equality in Iceland has been conceptualized according to the early liberal framework, focusing on opportunities as well as formal and legal rights rather than equal outcomes (Einarsdottir & Leiknisdottir, 2007:4). The adolescents participating in this study were born in 1993. Most likely, their political memory does not cover the presence of the Women's Alliance representatives in the parliament or Vigdís Finnbogadóttir who was elected the first female president in the world. They are raised within liberal discourses about the supposed achievement of gender equality and rising scepticism toward gender mainstreaming actions. My observations on how the students express their attitudes towards gender equality does not only tell us how they perceive the historical reality they have been raised; in it also gives us ideas about the evolving historical reality of the future.

2 Observation of gender equality attitudes

The method of the study was based on qualitative research methods. The researcher works with a small group of participants and seeks to focus on many aspects of the research topic in order to get a deep understanding of the attitudes of the participants and their views on the issues. Each respondent is expected to provide detailed information on the research topic, and the researcher anticipates gaining depth, coherence and completion of the material provided by each respondent (Weiss, 1994). Qualitative research is most often conducted by interviewing, utilizing participant observation or by performing focus groups. Researching documents, life histories and case studies are well known research methods within the category of qualitative research as well (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

In qualitative research, the researcher is responsible for directing the respondents to the topics relevant to the study and having the respondents provide their own knowledge. Interviews can give access to the experiences and attitudes of others; they can also provide information about the nature of social life (Weiss, 1994). The researcher aims to understand sociological phenomena from the viewpoint of the participants and their experiences. According to phenomenological theories, reality is made through sociological interactions, and those who work within the field explore how individuals experience and create their social reality (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

The purpose of qualitative research is not to create generalizations about large populations or shed light on the attitudes of a large group. Usually the value of generalization in qualitative research for a large group or the general population is quite limited, but the findings from such research can give insight into attitudes and situations among similar groups of people, for

example, among cohorts of young people. Furthermore, the findings can stimulate further research and implications for theory.

2.1 Focus group discussions

Data was generated in this study through focus groups. Focus groups are a qualitative research technique that generates data on a certain topic decided by the researcher through group interaction. Using this method is therefore a way of encouraging discussion and can be conducted under various circumstances with different group sizes and in a variety of locations. While the data comes from group interaction, the researcher's 'interest' provides the center of attention of the group (Morgan, 1997). The researcher influences the interaction of the group less than in a one-on-one interview. In a focus group discussion, the participants can reveal more of their own frame of reference on the subject in responding to each other; "the language they use, the emphasis they give and their general framework of understanding is more spontaneously on display" (Finch & Lewis, 2003).

By choosing to facilitate focus group discussions, I aimed to generate a lively discussion on gender equality. As a feminist researcher, I consider that conducting focus group discussions serves the research subjects well, and that such methods are more 'naturalistic' than others in the sense that they tap into the usual "modes of communication" and "the everyday social processes" that constitute the participants' social lives (Wilkinson, 2004). An ongoing debate within the social sciences is whether focus group can provide as accurate data as do individual interviews, and some scholars' claim that people act differently within a group than they do in individual interviews (Morgan, 1997). Some topics are more personal than others but it can be assumed that capturing the group dynamic on a matter such as gender equality yields dynamic results. As a participant in a group discussion, each individual engages in interaction with other contributors,

and, in a way, is more of a member in a social group than an individual acting in isolation. The focus group itself can be seen as a social context (Wilkinson, 2004).

Taking into account group dynamics and the fact that the presence of a group will affect what and how things are said, three types of groups were formed: a mixed group with both girls and boys, an all-girls group, and an all-boys groups. Through these groups I aimed to explore if the sexes articulate their attitudes and experiences differently due to the combination of the group and whether the interactions in the groups among participants are different depending on its structure. The group dynamic indicates a limitation in focus group discussions. The group itself can influence the nature of the data produced within it, and “the question of how interacting in a group influences what each individual will contribute to the group” (Morgan, 1997) has to be taken into consideration as a weakness of collecting data by conducting focus groups. Interpretation of data is always an issue in analyzing data conducted through qualitative research. The following thesis presents my interpretation of the interactions between the adolescents participating in the five focus group discussions on issues of gender equality in Iceland.

This study relies on inductive reasoning. Instead of starting out by trying to prove, test or illustrate a ‘theory’, I analyze and interpret a set of circumscribed observations and controlled experiences in order to arrive at some general insights. I like to conceptualize my approach as what Berg (2007:24) calls ‘the spiraling approach in research’. Figure 2.1 illustrates Berg’s idea of the spiraling research approach:

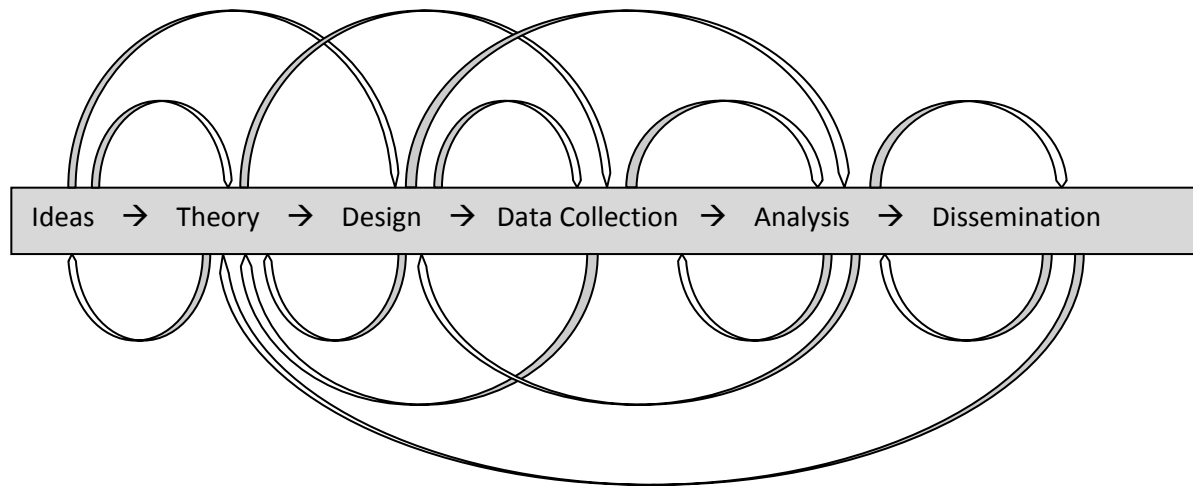


Figure 2.1 The spiraling research approach.

Instead of conceiving the research process as linear, I approached it more as spiraling forward by refining and reconsidering ideas and theoretical assumptions along the way, then taking a step or two backwards for every two steps forward, never really leaving any stage behind completely (Berg, 2007). The inspiration of the following research is the result of my former quantitative research on adolescent attitudes towards gender equality. My findings revealed that adolescents in Iceland hold less egalitarian views on gender equality than older generations. In addition, 10th graders in Icelandic elementary schools in 2006 held more traditional attitudes toward the gendered division of housework than the same cohort of students did in 1992 (Hjalmsdottir, 2007). By referring to the spiral approach I have been able to conceptualize how my former research motivated my (re)thinking of research design and theoretical assumptions as well as the unforeseen circumstances of the ‘kreppa’. The turbulent economic situation in Iceland during the time of my fieldwork did affect how the discussion in the focus groups evolved. To react to the “different” everyday reality facing me and the participants, I revisited the semi-structured questions guide during the discussion process to attend to issues concerning the ‘kreppa’ which I had not anticipated when designing the research earlier. The economic circumstances and the

tendency for discussions to turn around issues concerning the current situation were incorporated into the spiral approach as it reviewed the theoretical assumptions of the research during the process of analysis.

2.2 Methods of data generation

In June, 2008, Jóhanna María Arnardóttir, Brekkuskóli's principal, consented to this research to be conducted among the 10th graders in the school. Brekkuskóli's remedial teacher was assigned as the school's contact person to the researcher. Recruitment of participants was conducted through the school, during school hours. The two supervisory teachers of the 10th grade divisions informally told their students about the project. I was subsequently invited to visit the classrooms to introduce my project, explaining the methods and the purpose of the research. During my visits in the classrooms I distributed letters to the parents and the parental consent forms among the students. The contact person arranged a box situated in the school's office where students could hand in their signed parental consent forms. The focus groups were formed depending on the participants' schedules and in the hopes of, catching the students right after their formal school day and before leaving the school building.

All the focus group discussions were facilitated in the same classroom at Brekkuskóli from November 13–21, 2009. In total, the 10th grade cohort in Brekkuskóli has forty-nine students. According to the policy of the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethical Board, which approved the study in November 2008, each student was required to hand in a completed parent or legal guardian consent form to be able to participate in the research. In all, thirty students handed in parental consent forms and five focus groups were generated, one mixed sex group (girls and boys), two boys groups and two girls groups. Twenty-eight students participated in the focus groups as one boy and one girl were sick when their focus groups were

conducted. Fourteen girls participated and fourteen boys. All of the focus group discussions were tape recorded. Before the start of every session every participant signed a consent form. All the discussions were conducted in Icelandic. Each session lasted from an hour to an hour and a half. In total the focus group discussions lasted for 5 hours and 55 minutes. The students were provided pizza and soda while participating.

In qualitative research such as this, it is important to have questions that lead to open discussions, rather than using leading questions, so that the respondents will have the space and opportunity to raise their own opinions on the subject matter and to discuss them unhindered and freely (Esterberg, 2002). Following this emphasis on open discussion, a semi-structured discussion guide was used to keep discussions on track. As a moderator, I tried to keep certain individuals within a group from influencing the opinions of other participants and from being too dominant during the discussion (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Hallur Gunnarsson acted as the research assistant, and he was present during all the five focus group discussions. Hallur is a computer scientist concerned with issues of gender equality. His main role was to take field notes during the discussions, but he also asked questions and occasionally participated in the discussion. After each focus group discussion we compared our notes and experiences while recording the field notes. Issues of gender equality often seem to be seen as a ‘female issue’ and to have a male assistant appeared to provide a good ‘balance’ during the discussions with the teenagers.

Before the focus group discussions, I had a very helpful conversation with the school’s contact in which she offered her knowledge of the school’s infrastructure and insights into the activities of the participants. She provided helpful points, some of which were used to stimulate the discussions in the focus groups. Both the principal and the school’s adviser, with whom I had informal discussion, were remarkably positive towards the theme of the research. The 10th

graders' 'life skills' (lífsleikni) teacher was interviewed one-on-one on her experience of teaching about gender equality.

2.3 Data analysis

After all the data had been collected the focus groups discussions were transcribed by me and the process of analysis began, I made use of the methods of “open coding”, “the analytical process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998:101); and “axial coding”, “the process of relating categories to the subcategories termed “axial” because coding occurs around the axis of a category, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998:123). These methods made it possible to outline themes from the data, and to develop thematic charts to structure the main themes and the subthemes from the discussions.

The main focus of the analysis was to organize the data according to themes, individuals, groups, dialogues, and contradictions. Although, the dominant discourses shape individual behaviour and ideas, individuals typically experience themselves as free agents as members of a democratic society (Magnusdottir, 2003:63). I paid particular attention to how the participants echoed and interpreted the dominant discourses on gender equality and to contradictions throughout the students discussions. The thesis is constructed around the main themes introduced in the following chapters.

2.4 The research puzzle

What do Icelandic 10th graders think about gender equality?

The connections between individualism, neo-liberal politics, marketing and ideas of personal free choice affect the likelihood of a successful campaign for gender equality. The aim of the study is to analyze how the participants in the focus group discussions articulate their perceptions on

gender equality issues in Iceland and their understanding of gendered power relations in society. Attention was given to how the students perceive and interpret what I chose to call the ‘dominant discourses’ which are frequently expressed through the media, in political debates and at the institutional and policy level. Foucault (2003) claims that knowledge and power are interlinked through discourses. How have Icelandic adolescents adopted a knowledge of and discourses about gender equality in a supposedly gender egalitarian society like Iceland?

With respect to gender equality, the links between the private and the public spheres are important since these overlapping fields affect an individual’s life in multifarious ways (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). With this in mind I focused on gendered relations within the home as well as the labour market, observing how adolescents’ view the gendered division of labour of housework and gendered affairs in the public domain. The focal point is directed towards the participants’ ideas on what can be perceived as a ‘fair’ gendered division of housework and their ideas about future domestic partnerships. In addition, their ideas on the gendered division of the labour market and positions of power are studied in relation to how they perceive Icelandic reality.

In current discourses, feminists and feminism have been under attack from both women and men who claim that while they support gender equality they are not feminists. What is the view of adolescents toward feminists and the struggle for gender equality? Do they articulate ideas related to conservative views, especially among the girls? Is gender conservatism becoming more politically correct? Do the boys see themselves as ‘neutral’? Is it possible that girls and young women are more sensitive and obedient to dominant conservative discourses than young men and boys? The structure of the thesis is organized to answer these questions and to shed light on Brekkuskóli’s 10th graders’ attitudes towards gender equality.

2.5 The field

2.5.1 Akureyri

Recent research findings on attitudes toward gender equality among adolescents do not reveal significant differences in gender role attitudes among rural and urban adolescents in Iceland (Bjarnason & Hjalmsdottir, 2008). My fieldwork took place in northern rural Iceland; all the participants live in Akureyri. This town of little over 17500 inhabitants, often called ‘the capital of the north’, is the largest urban area apart from the greater capital area in and surrounding Reykjavík (Statistics Iceland, 2009a). Despite its small population Akureyri is vibrant center of education, art and diverse life. The municipality employs over 2000 people (Akureyri, 2009b), and the town is the home to the University of Akureyri, the Akureyri School of Fine Art, two Akureyri’s Junior Colleges, Akureyri General Hospital, the Akureyri Art Museum and the Office for Gender Equality, to name several larger institutions. Akureyri is also the home of one of Iceland’s three biggest fishing companies (Samherji, 2009), and provides various services as the biggest urban area apart from the greater capital area. In additions to the higher education institutions mentioned above, Akureyri has eight primary schools in town (Akureyri, 2009b).

Akureyri has been governed since the 2006 elections by a conglomerate majority municipal government that consists of the Conservative Party and the Social Democratic Party. The Conservative Party has been part of the municipal government since 1998 elections, with different representatives. The Akureyri municipal government has eleven members from five different political parties, six men and five women. For the last few decades, the mayor has been politically elected and is one of the eleven members of the government body. In January 2007, Sigrún Björk Jakobsdóttir, was elected as the first female mayor of the town (Akureyri, 2009b).

Some feminists have pointed out that the discourse of equality can be used to distract attention from gender-based demands by distributing the focus across multiple issues. Many

feminist scholars have warned of such a competitive intersectional approach and point out the fact that interest in other inequalities may attenuate the effort spent on gender mainstreaming (see e.g. Thorvaldsdottir & Einarsdottir, 2007). However, other scholars claim that the shift in focus away from gender equality to the discourses of human rights has revealed “a way of working across differences while utilizing the powerful discourse of human rights” (Walby, 2002:549).

In Iceland, among other European countries, this tension, phrased as the “political competition between equalities”, has been growing and can be traced within policy-making in the municipality of Akureyri in recent years. The tension arises between those who want to relate the issue of equality to broader kinds of structural inequalities and those who want to keep the focus on separate equality issues, such as gender equality (Thorvaldsdottir & Einarsdottir, 2007). The City of Reykjavík and the University of Iceland, which have been leaders in merging gender equality into public policy, have recently replaced “gender equality” with “equality for all” in their policies. “The emerging ‘equality for all’ policy taking place in Iceland is in an historical and social context where gender relations are embedded in a liberal and individualistic, gender skeptical atmosphere and where feminist knowledge is not recognized” (Thorvaldsdottir & Einarsdottir, 2007:20).

This tendency towards discounting gender equality issues in favour of a non-gender-based emphasis on “different” equality issues is evident in recent changes within Akureyri’s public policy. From 1991 the municipality of Akureyri maintained a position of “equal opportunities officer” until 2006, when the municipal government made some significant organizational changes, especially in the field of “soft issues” such as gender equality, migration, children recreation, youth affair and preventative measures in child behaviour. The changes discontinued the “equal opportunities officer” position, as well as the *Committee of Gender Equality*. Instead, a *Committee of Social and Human Rights Issues* was established, covering all the “soft issues”

mentioned above, which formerly were addressed by separate departments and committees. The “equal opportunity officer” is now integrated into the position of the divisional manager of the *Social and Human Rights Department of Akureyri*. The divisional manager still has issues of gender equality as part of their job description, but now serves more as a consultant on the matter (Akureyri, 2009b).

Despite the changes towards institutionalized ‘gender blindness’ outlined above, Akureyri’s Gender Equality Policy focuses on gender equality exclusively. As outlined in the first paragraph of the document, this focus is in harmony with Icelandic national laws, where the focus is on gender equality. The policy stipulates Akureyri’s main obligations related to issues of gender equality, and how and whose responsibility it is to fulfill those obligations in order to construct a society where women and men have equal rights to enjoy life at its best (Akureyri, 2009a)

In Iceland, local authorities have the primary responsibility to operate schools, and each local authority must provide schooling for all children 6 to 16 years of age. As stated in the National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory School, local authorities are responsible for implementing the Compulsory School Act;

The Compulsory School Act gives local authorities and schools substantial latitude to arrange study to fit the needs and conditions of each community; the central principle, however, as laid down in the Act and the National Curriculum Guide, is to provide all children with the opportunity to study in their local schools. (Ministry of Education, 2004)

In order to fulfill the provision of the Compulsory School Act, the municipality of Akureyri approved a new school policy for its primary school in 2005. The School Policy of Akureyri is based on four cornerstones: knowledge, skillfulness, respect and wellbeing. All schools should put equal emphasis on book learning, work learning and moral learning. Moral learning implies maturation of feelings and the rationality to choose to act appropriately towards others. The

student should understand different ways of living and develop a respect for different ways of living and different patterns of behaving. The schools provide education that is integral for life-long learning, while at the same time the focus is on the conditions and the position of each individual within society. The aim of the Akureyri's primary schools is to provide the basis for the successful future of their students (Akureyri, 2009b). The previously mentioned changes toward more 'gender blindness' in municipal public policy are also evident within the Akureyri School Policy. The document has one line that touches on issues of gender equality. It states that "In good schools [...] gender equality is fostered and ways to guarantee the success of girls and boys should be sought out" (Akureyri, 2009b).

2.5.2 Brekkuskóli

All the participants in the focus group discussions conducted for the study are students in Brekkuskóli's 10th grade. The grade is the last year of compulsory schooling in Icelandic primary schools. Brekkuskóli was established in 1997, when the oldest elementary and secondary schools in Akureyri were unified into one primary school. Brekkuskóli has 549 students from 1st to 10th grade, 287 girls and 262 boys (Brekkuskoli, 2009). The school is the largest of eight primary schools in town. Brekkuskóli has eighty-three staff members, fifty-six of them in teaching and administration plus twenty-seven other staff members, such as secretaries, janitorial staff, supervisors and hall monitors. The school's newly hired principal is a woman, Jóhanna María Agnarsdóttir, who replaced the former (male) principal in June 2008. The vice-principal and the two divisional managers holding administrative positions in the school are also female (Brekkuskoli, 2009).

Otherwise, Brekkuskóli's gendered division of staff members follows the pattern most commonly seen within the Icelandic primary school system: women are the majority of the staff.

Of Brekkuskóli's fifty-six teachers, fourteen are men and forty-two are women. Interestingly, only half of the male teachers provide 'ordinary' teaching, the other half is teaching so-called 'special subjects', such as vocational skills, music, gymnastics and information technology. Notably, all the male teachers in 'ordinary' classes teach in grade six to ten. None of the seven male class teachers teach in the elementary division (Brekkuskoli, 2009). The uneven gendered division of staff members is even more striking with respect to 'other staff'. Apart from the fourteen male teachers only three men are staff members in Brekkuskóli, the chef in the canteen and the two supervisors of the school.

Being the largest primary school in Akureyri, Brekkuskóli is situated in and serves the oldest neighbourhoods in town, close to the town center. In Icelandic towns with more than one primary school, the general rule is that the students go to the school closest to their home. The majority of Brekkuskóli's students come from the area surrounding the school, but for the last few years, students from a newly built neighbourhood a bit further away also attend the school since construction on the new neighbourhood's school has not yet been finished.

For decades the municipality of Akureyri has had a policy of serving diverse income neighbourhoods. In the planning process, the structure of new neighbourhoods allows for single-family houses, town houses and apartment buildings of various sizes. The neighbourhood surrounding Brekkuskóli was built prior to this kind of policymaking and has no apartment buildings (condominiums), but rather various sizes of single-family housing, including town houses and smaller apartment houses. Although old and well established neighbourhoods often appeal to higher income families, Brekkuskóli offers an interesting combination of students from old and new neighbourhoods with considerable variations in housing, as well as family income.

In Brekkuskóli's curriculum, like other primary schools in Iceland, courses are based on the National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory School. The guide is published by the Ministry of

Education as a manual for all local authorities and every school in the country, as stated in the General Section:

The National Curriculum Guide defines and describes the common study objectives which compulsory schools should aim at and specifies the minimum number of instructional hours which pupils are to be provided with in individual subjects and subject areas. Local authorities and schools may arrange at their discretion part of this minimum instruction to which pupils are entitled, in addition to which they may offer additional hours of instruction exceeding the minimum mandatory requirements. In Grades 9 and 10, this flexibility applies to around 30% of the time stipulated in the Curriculum Guide. In these grades, pupils are expected to have the opportunity to choose between subjects and subject areas (Ministry of Education, 2004).

Like the other schools in town, Brekkuskóli is also structured by Akureyri's School Policy, and has its own vision and working policy for its teachers, staff and students.

Brekkuskóli's policy and vision statement document declares that in cooperation with the students' households the main aims are to prepare its students for life and work and to help them to find and take advantage of their own potentials. The school's vision echoes with human rights declared in United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Brekkuskoli, 2009). The policy and vision statement of Brekkuskóli is divided into eight main themes: (1) The role of the school; (2) Services; (3) Finance; (4) Internal responsibilities; (5) Employers; (6) Main emphasis of the school policy; (7) Brekkuskóli's future vision and (8) Brekkuskóli's social contract. The main themes throughout the statement of vision are: *education, joy, concern and progress* (Brekkuskoli, 2009). Since 2004, Brekkuskóli's effort has emphasized 'individualistic teaching methods'. The aim of such individualistic teaching methods is to better meet the needs of each and every individual student on her or his own terms.

Brekkuskóli's policy and vision statement does not explicitly mention equality. It does state that teachers and students should respect each other and be tolerant, but equality based on gender, race, religion or sexuality is not directly mentioned in the school's statement and vision.

The school's advisor and the teacher of the life-skills (lífsleikni) course taught in 10th grade, talked about the urgent need for good teaching materials on issues of gender equality. In the life-skills course, the students have been studying one of the few materials accessible for gender study teaching in Icelandic. The booklet, *Kynlega klippt og skorið*, has a very visual format. The author provides ideas for possible projects which aim to challenge the students' ideas concerning the 'normal' structures of the society. Not long before the group discussions were conducted, the students had completed a project on the gendered division of housework in their current home, as well as noted their own tasks within the household. Therefore, the participants had given thought to issues such as the division of housework before participating in the focus group discussions, which was helpful. The life-skills teacher described it as very helpful material, but short (24 pages), and noted that more detailed teaching material would certainly be welcome.

This lack of teaching material in gender studies points to what has been referred to as the hidden curriculum. The concept of the hidden curriculum has been used by scholars of education to explain how education in primary school goes beyond published curricula (Thordardottir, 2005:47). This hidden curriculum has much to do with what students in schools learn about gender. Informal education on gender is ongoing within every school. The school does not only echo the prevailing ideas, but also drives different ideas towards the margin of what is counted as 'normal' or 'acceptable'. Conventional ideas are maintained by silence, which appear in the fact that 'ruling relations' of men and women are not discussed (not to mention challenge) within the school institution. Instead, the school encourages (accepted) stereotypes based on gender (Thordardottir, 2005:47-8). The absence of gender studies from the published curriculum and the lack of proper teaching materials makes it even harder to challenge the established circulation of power within a society's 'relations of ruling'.

2.6 The group dynamic

All the focus groups were formed out of “pre-existing social groups” (Wilkinson, 2004) from two divisions of the 10th grade cohort of Brekkuskóli. Many of the participants have attended this same school since 1st grade and all of the participants knew each other, although not everybody would be defined as a friends. Since I had the goal of capturing the participants by the end of their school day, before they would leave the school, the groups ended up being not as mixed from the two different divisions as I intended. In 10th grade the students can choose optional subjects. Because their subjects of choice were commonly the last class of the day, it affected how the focus groups were formed. Surprisingly, the groups seemed to reflect the divisions along which subjects were picked. It seems that peer groups from each division picked similar elective subjects, in a way that grouped this cohort of 10th graders in a interesting way: in one of the classes the girls were described by the participants as being stronger students and the boys more like ‘dunces’, but in the other class the boys were describes as being the stronger students and the girls more like ‘dunces’. This gendered division of school performance was brought up in all the focus groups and is based on descriptions and opinions from the participants themselves. Other descriptions around the group dynamic and the participants are my own, and sometimes worked up in cooperation with my research assistant.

For years Iceland has been an ‘egalitarian middle class society’ (Hudson, 2009) and participants in the focus group discussions reflect that demographic. As Brekkuskóli is situated in a rather homogenous neighbourhood, the participants reflect a common style of dress and seem to have similar hobbies and tastes which reflect similar influences. Of course there are some exceptions, but in general the interviewees are “typical” teenagers from Akureyri. In light of the smallness of the cohort, as well as the smallness of the town, issues of confidentiality are

especially fragile. Although Akureyri had been my home town for seven years before moving to Vancouver, I did not know any of the participants personally. Neither did Hallur, the research assistant. To protect the privacy of participants, all names are pseudonyms and detailed background information cannot be provided. Instead, I draw a broad sketch of the groups as a whole, as well as of the particular group dynamics going on in this third floor classroom at Brekkuskóli in November 2008. Diagrams are provided to illustrate the configuration of each of the groups while the focus group discussions were conducted.

2.6.1 The first all-girls group: Group A

Hallur Gunnarsson	
	Soffía
Agnes	Elisabet
Berta	Elín
Andrea Hjalmsdóttir	

The first all-girls group was the most *rebellious* group among the five focus groups. The girls did not associate themselves with feminism, but they were fighting a battle. The girls were very sincere and outgoing about their opinions and experiences. Some feelings of irritation, almost

anger, were part of the group dynamic. This was the group that talked the most about personal matters and shared openly the experience of being “different”. Elín was the most talkative one, although all of them participated actively, except Soffía who was silent. Even if Elín was the most talkative one, she did not ‘lead’ the discussion in one direction, as the other girls did not hesitate to disagree or redirect the discussion. All these girls, except Soffía, described how they have to stand up for themselves, mostly because of looking or behaving differently. One of them used to be a tomboy, playing and fighting with the boys and rejecting anything associated with girlhood (Currie et al., 2009:130). One day, however, she found out that she did not fit with either the boys or the girls, and she submitted to the pressure to identify with the other teenage girls. Other participants described how they felt they have been discriminated against because of their looks. They both dressed and performed as Goths, and one explained how her haircolour inspired a lot of teasing. They all agreed that society is too preoccupied with looks, and that people judge others too much by their looks rather than giving people a chance to prove themselves and to demonstrate their personality. As a result of their private experiences, the ‘spirit of resistance’ was very prominent throughout the discussion in this group and they all could see themselves participating in the struggle for gender equality in the future. Most of the participants in this group were in the class where the girls were regarded by other participants to be weaker students than the boys in the class.

2.6.2 The first all-boys group: Group B

Hallur Gunnarsson	
Gabriel	Jónatan
Daníel	Baldvin
Elías	Karl
Andrea Hjálmsdóttir	

There was a lot of “testosterone” going on in this group as the boys were exercising their hegemonic masculinity. The discussion in the first all-boys’ group was heavily influenced by Gabriel’s behaviour throughout the discussions. He played the role of the ‘joker’ among the participants, and seemed to be making an effort to provoke me, although unsuccessfully, as he once declared during the group discussions that he found me to be “surprisingly calm”. His behaviour was exaggerated, especially in the beginning of the discussion, as he made ‘male chauvinist’ jokes and sometimes undermined comments from others. However, he did not cross the line of being offensive and simmered down as the discussions progressed. The other boys were amazingly active in their participation despite Gabriel’s behaviour. Still, Elías was the most silent one, and Karl was quite expressive in the beginning yet backed out a little as the conversation went on. To me and my assistant, Karl’s social position appeared to be the weakest

in this group. Nevertheless he made thoughtful comments throughout the discussion. Although the other boys acknowledged that Gabríel was mostly joking and provoking the discussion, there was a lot of laughter and giggling. Interestingly, most of them agreed with a lot of Gabríel's comments, and the 'male chauvinism' (karlremban) emerging just beneath the surface came across as quite a surprise to us [Andrea and Hallur]. Gabríel was the only participant in the group who talked about having girlfriend; it is interesting to consider in the context of his exaggerated behaviour whether the experience of having girlfriend gave him power to exercise hegemonic masculinity within the group. Still, the boys claimed that they were in full support of gender equality, but implied this was conditional as long as it that this would not affect their (superior) position. Most of the participants in this group were regarded by the other participants to be weaker students in their class than the girls.

2.6.3 The mixed sex group: Group C

Hallur Gunnarsson	
Kamilla	Gústaf
Inga	Harald
Andrea Hjálmsd.	Hilda

The dynamic in this group was very interesting and different from the girls only and the boys only groups. The fact that the number of boys and girls participating in the group was not equal

(three girls and two boys) might have affected the group dynamic. The third boy was sick on the day of the discussions. Hilda and Inga were the most talkative. Gústaf was an active participant but Kamilla and Harald were more silent. It was very interesting to observe how they all painstakingly attempted to remain “politically correct” views – neither the girls nor the boys seemed to want to rock the boat of ‘normative’ behaviour for boys and girls. They were shy and none of them replied spontaneously, as participants did in the other groups, which seemed to have more to do with the presence of the opposite sex than of Hallur and me. From the discussion it might be inferred that these two boys were the ones who supported gender equality the most out of all the male participants, but I assume that this has more to do with the composition of the group. For example, the girls were more upset about the gendered pay gap, a view which the boys supported just as the girls supported Gústaf who could not envision himself being a preschool teacher. Although all the students considered gender equality to be an unfair situation, in this mixed gender group the fear that the unknown somehow justifies the traditions, good or bad, was most prominent. The social turbulence which was ongoing during those days in November could also have something to do with the fear of rocking the (gendered roles) boat.

2.6.4 The last all-girls group: Group D

Hallur Gunnarsson	
Linda	Rósa
María	Kamilla
Indíana	Karólína
Andrea Hjalmsdóttir	

The participants in the last all-girls group were very different from the former one in that there was very little resistance observed in this group. Kamilla got permission to participate in this group as well as the previous one. She was rather silent in this context as in the mixed group, although the other girls all actively participated in the discussions. They were not as openly talkative about their personal experiences as the girls in the other group. They acted as if they were in class, and tried to answer as ‘correctly’ as possible, although as the discussions went on the girls became more dedicated and more sincere. All of the girls seemed to fit quite well with the following description of popular girls from the book *Girl Power*: “They are tall, skinny. Yeah, they tend to wear a lot of like low-slung jeans, tanks tops that bare their belly a lot...Not all of them are blond but [they] all have long hair” (Currie et al., 2009:86). Since it was winter there were no bare bellies, but the participants all had long hair, and they were stylish and pretty.

These girls tended to be very polite and at the same time they were very aware of how to behave ‘correctly’. They were much less opinionated than the girls in the other group and better adapted to neo-liberal discourses based on individual choices. Although the unfairness of gender inequality was openly rejected, and they did not see themselves as participants in the struggle for gender equality in the future, they would support such a struggle but not necessarily as active participants. Most of the participants in this group were in the class where the girls were claimed by the participants to be stronger students than the boys.

2.6.5 The last all-boys group: Group E

Hallur Gunnarsson	
Lars	Nói
Jakob	Kristján
Lúkas	Ísak
Andrea Hjalmsdóttir	

As among the girls-only groups the two boys groups were different from one another. The participants in this group were quite calm and the obvious exercise of masculinity was not as observable as it was in the first group. All the participants in this group were active throughout

the discussions. The boys seemed rather distant in that they did not feel that this topic was their field. They repeatedly claimed that gender equality issues are more the concern of women. The boys in this group were more like the ‘popular boys’ compared to the other group. They appeared to be self-assured and the dynamic in the group was rather laid back; none of them seemed to have the need to provoke me. But at the same time the messages they gave were strikingly similar to the other boys’ group, which will be discussed in further detail later. Most of the participants in this group were in the class where the boys were claimed by the participants to be stronger students than the girls.

As outlined above, each group had its own characteristics and unique dynamic. Generally the participants were active during the discussion and interested in the topics they brought up. To talk about gender equality within the private and the public spheres required the participants to think on an abstract level, and in general that seemed to be easier for the girls participating than the boys. Nevertheless, the two boy’s groups and the two girl’s groups were not the same. Rather, it can be argued that one group of each sex were more alike, one ‘outspoken’ group of each and one ‘calmer’ group of each. The dynamic in the mixed-sex group was different from all the other four groups. Through the discussions in all the groups a feminist researcher could observe the ‘biting reality’ of attitudes towards gender equality during times of societal turbulence.

3 The private sphere: Families and housework

3.1 'One way revolution'

With respect to gender equality, attitudes towards the division of domestic labour are especially important since they express the connection between the private and public spheres of an individual's life in multifarious ways (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). Women's increasing participation in the labour market in the Western world has not necessarily resulted in a more egalitarian division of domestic labour (Knudsen & Waernes, 2008). On the one hand, factors such as the amount of hours worked outside the home, education and earnings are good indicators of the equal distribution of work within households (Bianchi et al., 2000; Bittman et al., 2003; Cunningham, 2007; Evertsson & Nermo, 2007; Kitterod & Pettersen, 2006). But on the other hand, attitudes towards gender equality can have an independent impact on the division of domestic labour, among both adults (Fuwa, 2004; Geist, 2005; Lewin-Epstein, Stier, & Braun, 2006) and adolescents (Silvan-Ferrero & Lopez, 2007). In relation to these indications, Icelandic men contributed thirty-four percent of the total hours worked within households, compared to the forty-three percent average contribution to housework made by men in Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden in 2005 (Thorsdottir, 2007).

Despite remarkably high labour force participation among women in Iceland, the responsibility for housework and family reproduction has had a negative impact on women's careers (Gislason, 2007). The traditional bread-winner model assumes that with marriage women will withdraw themselves from the job market, retreating into the home to have children and do the housework. The fact that women have a reproductive role has diminished their value on the job market, while at the same time men with families tend to get higher wages than men who do not have families. This attitude towards women's childbearing and its effect on their careers is

apparent in a study on the gender pay gap conducted in 1994. In a national survey, directors of companies were asked to describe their attitudes toward their employees' having children. Overall, 27 percent of the directors believed that having children had a negative impact on women's careers, while none of them thought that having children had a negative impact on men's careers (Gislason, 2007).

It has been argued that decisions about whether and when to become a mother and how to manage having and caring for children are the most perplexing and difficult challenges facing young women today (see e.g. Gislason, 2007). This challenge illustrates that only a "half" of the sex revolution has been completed around the world. Cousins and Tang (2004) have suggested that increased pressure and tension surrounding the combination of paid work and family life will become even more challenging in the future. Gender roles have become more similar between women and men due to the fact that all across Western Europe women, predominantly mothers of young children, have increasingly been entering the labour market, while at the same time men's participation in domestic work has been increasing at a much slower rate (Crompton et al, 2005).

Large scale changes have occurred in women's behaviour. There has been a revolution in their lifestyle and increased participation in the labour force, especially in combining obligations of paid work and family. However, at the same time that women are revolutionizing their everyday lives, changes in men's behaviour have been much more limited. Housework has become more gender equal over time, but this is not because men do much more at home than before; women are simply doing less domestic work than in earlier days (Kitterod & Pettersen, 2006, Crompton et al., 2005, Gronmo & Lingsom, 1986). These larger changes in women's behaviour underline Gronmo's and Lingsom's suggestion that it seems to be more difficult to achieve changes in the divisions of labour with regard to unpaid work in the home than has been the case for paid work (1986:176). It could be assumed that many young women today, at least in

the West, would agree that housework is not as big a part of their daily routine as it was for their mothers or even grandmothers, although they are not doing less work in total. What is different now is that a greater share of the work is done in paid jobs outside of the home.

Thorsdottir has emphasized that ‘housework is an ambiguous term’, as she points out that within some of the feminist literature there is a lack of consensus on the definitions and boundaries of domestic labour (2007:5). Thorsdottir further indicates that some studies on housework do not even define the term housework at all. Frequently, studies restrict care for others to childcare, simply leaving out the caring for others within the term of housework, which includes preparing meals, doing laundry and so on. Attempts to define housework have often ended up being too broad and unhelpful, since it is not always clear which activities should be excluded (Thorsdottir, 2007:6). In their study on housework in Norway, Gronmo and Lingsom offer a comprehensive definition of housework:

Household work is unpaid work carried out in or for the household, by members of the household. This work includes care of children and other household members, maintenance of dwelling and household equipment, purchase of goods and services, and routine housework tasks, such as meal preparation, meal clean-up, house cleaning, and care of clothes, as well as travel in connection with these activities. Thus, household work is distinguished from activities related to paid work, or market work, as well as from leisure and personal care activities (1986:177).

In public discourses on gender equality in Iceland, the private sphere has received much less attention than has the public sphere. Einarsdottir has gone as far as to claim that ‘the private sphere is the forgotten battlefield of the struggle for gender equality’, since it has been overshadowed by the emphasis on equality issues across the public sphere (Einarsdottir, 2000). It is important to recognize that the same people, women and men, are occupying these two social spheres, so that equality at home ought to be one of the core foundations for equal opportunities on the labour market. When the adolescents were asked about their opinions on what gender

equality consists of, this lack of attention to the division of housework was clearly reflected. None of the participants in the focus group discussion mentioned any of the tasks included in Gronmo's and Lingsom's definition of housework as relevant to gender equality issues. In all five focus groups the participants agreed that gender equality consists of equal opportunities on the labour market and equal pay. This finding can also reflect how housework has been historically devalued. As Lúkas stated, "well, it's not all that difficult to take care of the housework". Bourdieu claims that "the fact that women's domestic labour has no monetary equivalent does indeed help to devalue it, even in their own eyes" (2001:98). This claim was reflected throughout the focus group discussions. The participants clearly did not conceptualize housework as valued work, and they could more easily picture themselves in the future in relation to the public than to the private sphere.

3.2 "Well... actually my mom does the greater share"

The dominant discourse on gender equality in Iceland has leaned towards the idea that gender equality has been achieved, or what little is left will change automatically with the aging and active participation of future generations. In stark contrast with this discourse, recent research has found young people to hold less egalitarian views on gender issues than older generations (Hjalmsdottir, 2007; Leiknisdottir, 2005). These findings are contrary to most studies of gender equality in other parts of the world, where young people are generally found to be more egalitarian than the older generations (e.g. Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004; Loo & Thorpe, 1998; Zhang, 2006). An optimistic interpretation of this anomaly would be that each successive generation in Iceland is equally egalitarian at the outset, and that the positive correlation between age and egalitarianism is produced by the tendency of people to become more egalitarian with age (Fan & Marini, 2000). Findings based on the comparison of two national surveys among

Icelandic 10th graders from 1992 and 2006 unfortunately provide rather strong circumstantial evidence for a more pessimistic interpretation, namely, that Icelandic youth in fact hold more traditional attitudes towards housework than their counterparts did in earlier years. Ironically, our findings also suggest that the gender gap in egalitarian attitudes is closing in Iceland, as girls are becoming more traditional at a faster rate than boys, as Table 3.1 reveals (Bjarnason & Hjalmsdottir, 2008:57).

Attitudes toward gendered household roles are measured by a ten-item scale. It was first used in a national survey of Icelandic adolescents in 1992 (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson 1993) and reproduced in the HBSC survey of the same age group in 2006. The ten items ask adolescents how they think a couple should divide a list of household tasks if both work full-time outside of the home. The ten tasks listed are (1) laundry, (2) cooking, (3) cleaning the house, (4) shopping for groceries, (5) waking up to tend to babies, (6) attending parent-teacher conferences, (7) doing the dishes, (8) taking care of household finances, (9) minor home repairs, and (10) taking care of the car. A factor analysis of these items confirmed that they represent two underlying factors: traditional female household roles (items 1–7) and traditional male household roles (items 8–10). The seven items measuring attitudes toward traditional female household roles were recoded into three categories (2: Always the wife, 1: usually the wife and 0: equal or husband). These items form a reliable scale (α : .80) and were recoded into a measure of egalitarian female household roles, ranging from 0 to 10. Similarly, the three items measuring traditional male household roles were recoded into three categories (2: Always the husband, 1: usually the husband and 0: equal or wife). These items also form a reliable scale (α : .75) and were recoded into a measure of egalitarian male household roles, ranging from 0 to 10. Descriptive statistics for these two dependent variables are shown in Table 3.1.

Changes in egalitarian attitudes and fertility expectations among 15-16 year old adolescents in Iceland, 1992 – 2006

	<i>Range</i>	<u>Girls</u>		<u>Boys</u>	
		1992	2006	1992	2006
<i>Egalitarian gender roles</i>	<i>0–10</i>	<i>8.79</i>	<i>8.11***</i>	<i>7.64</i>	<i>7.16***</i>
<i>Egalitarian female roles</i>	<i>0–10</i>	<i>9.30</i>	<i>8.84***</i>	<i>8.29</i>	<i>7.92***</i>
- Doing laundry	0–3	1.67	1.48***	1.39	1.24***
- Cooking food	0–3	1.87	1.80***	1.63	1.60
- Cleaning house	0–3	1.87	1.76***	1.59	1.46***
- Shopping for groceries	0–3	1.84	1.75***	1.69	1.61***
- Waking up to tend infants	0–3	1.86	1.83	1.70	1.69
- Attending parent-teacher meetings	0–3	1.93	1.82***	1.80	1.75*
- Doing the dishes		1.96	1.90***	1.77	1.71**
<i>Egalitarian male roles</i>	<i>0–10</i>	<i>7.58</i>	<i>6.42***</i>	<i>6.08</i>	<i>5.45***</i>
- Taking care of family finances	0–3	1.78	1.62***	1.56	1.50*
- Minor house repairs	0–3	1.38	1.12***	1.10	0.90***
- Taking care of family car	0–3	1.39	1.11***	.99	0.88***
<i>Future fertility plans</i>	<i>0–5</i>	<i>2.51</i>	<i>2.26***</i>	<i>2.32</i>	<i>2.13***</i>
- Number of children wanted	0–5	2.60	2.30***	2.38	2.14***
- Number of children expected	0–5	2.41	2.21***	2.26	2.12***
Significance of changes 1992–2006: * p. < .05 * p < .01 *** p. < .001					

Table 3.1 Changes in egalitarian attitudes among 15-16 year old adolescents, 1992-2006

Table 3.1 shows attitudes in favour of gender equality among fifteen to sixteen year old Icelandic students in 1992 and 2006. The ten-point scale of traditional gender attitudes shows that girls hold more egalitarian attitudes than boys in both periods. Attitudes toward male household roles are more traditional than attitudes toward female roles among both boys and girls. There has been a significant decrease in egalitarianism among both boys and girls in the 14-year period under analysis. The decrease in overall gender equality attitudes is 0.68 points for girls and 0.48 points for boys. For traditional female roles, the decrease is 0.46 for girls and 0.37 for boys, while for traditional male roles the decrease is 1.16 for girls and 0.63 for boys. The decrease in support for gender equality in the home therefore appears to be more pronounced for girls than for boys, and stronger for male household roles than female household roles. This decrease is found for most household tasks, although the change is not statistically significant for food preparation or

waking up to tend babies (for more detailed discussion see Bjarnason & Hjalmsdottir, 2008; Hjalmsdottir & Bjarnason, 2008; Hjalmsdottir, 2007).

This regression towards more traditional attitudes may reflect various economic, cultural and political changes in Icelandic society since the early 1990s. For instance, when adolescents were surveyed in 1992, a woman had been president of Iceland since the respondents were eight to nine years old and the Women's Alliance had been represented in the Parliament since they were eleven to twelve years old. In contrast, with the adolescents in the survey in 2006, a man had been president since they were eight to nine years old and the Women's Alliance had been dissolved when they were eight to nine years old. The adolescents born in 1990 have thus grown up in a significantly colder climate for gender equality in Iceland (Hjalmsdottir, 2007).

The participants in the focus group discussions were all born in 1993 and thus it can be argued that they were raised in the same "cold climate" towards gender equality as their counterparts born in 1990. When discussing the gender division of housework among their parents, some claimed that their mother did a greater share of the housework at home. However, the immediate responses among the participants were more typically that their parents would share the housework relatively equally. When discussed in more detail, however, some of them backed out by stating that when thinking about it more thoroughly, their mothers would probably be the ones doing a greater share of the housework. "No, no, they [her parents] share the housework equally... well... actually my mom does the greater share, when I think about it more carefully" (Kamilla). This response appeared to be the more common pattern reported by the participants among their parents but the adolescents were likely to have good explanations why their mother usually did the greater share of the housework. Here is the reaction in group E:

Andrea: But if you think about your own parents, since you obviously don't help a lot, do they share the housework equally?

- Ísak: No, my dad is working all the time.
- Jakob: Yes, exactly, my dad too – he is always absent because he is fishing¹
- Lúkas: He brings the money!
- Andrea: Do you think that this is somehow the role of the man, to bring home the money and the woman's to take care of the home?
- Lars: My mom and dad they both work outside of the home and then they both clean and...
- Nói: Yes, you know, mom and dad both work but she works a shorter day and also her job is easier and that's why she does the cleaning.
- Andrea: What do you mean by easier job?
- Nói: My dad is, you know, he is hardworking. Meanwhile my mom is, you know, she works in an elderly home.
- Lars: Well, that can be tough.
- Andrea: You might have to lift old people who need help moving around.
- Nói: Still his work is more difficult.
- Lars: Okay, I see.
- Nói: Hers is not all that difficult.

The following description of the division of housework among the parents of one participant in group A illustrates the gendered division of housework in Table 3.1 above. The father takes care of the traditional male tasks and the mother takes care of 'simply' the rest:

- Elín: If I wade through it, I think both my parents are very industrious, you know, but my father can sometimes be crazy lazy but that's because his back is aching all the time. But he takes care of everything like, you know, devices, machines and cars. You know he totally takes care of the car and, you know, he gets money and all that and he takes care of the finances and, you know, he is always doing something about the financial stuff, talking to some guys and in some

¹ Iceland's primary export is fish and for the last decades the fishing industry has become more and more dominant by so-called freezer-trawlers, which typically spend around 3-4 weeks at the time fishing.

business and something like that. Mom has a more simple way of living – me and the food and something.

Heteronormative roles seems to be taken for granted by all the participants throughout the interviews. They do not anticipate any other forms of relationships than between a woman and a man. In talking about future relationships, both girls and boys seem to take heterosexual relationship as ‘normal’. Despite different forms of domestic partnerships being legal and widely accepted within the society and a quite high divorce rate in Iceland, all the participants seem to have adopted what Dorothy Smith has called an “ideological code” of the family.

“Ideological codes”, Smith argues, are as what “order and organize texts across a discursive sites, according to discourse focused on divergent topics and sites, often having divergent audiences, and variously hooked into policy and political practice” (Smith, 1993:51). Smith emphasises that an ideological code is not a determined concept or idea; “rather, it is a constant generator of *procedures for selecting syntax, categories, and vocabulary in the writing of texts and the production of talk and for interpreting sentences*, written or spoken, ordered by it” (Smith, 1993:52, original emphasis).

Smith refers to the ‘Standard North American Family’ (SNAF) as one example of how an ideological code functions as “a schema that replicates its organization in multiple and various sites” (Smith, 1993:51). As SNAF has been used to implement certain ideas of the conception of the ideal partnership,

It is a conception of the family as a legally married couple sharing a household. The adult male is in paid employment; his earnings provide the economic basis for the family-household. The adult female may also earn an income, but her primary responsibility is the care of husband, household, and children. Adult males and females may be parents (in whatever legal sense) of children also resident in the household (Smith, 1993:52).

As Smith points out, this ideological code involves a language of typification, which overlooks, and even supresses from other quite widespread forms of families and households, but

is not necessarily intentionally used by the speakers. This code is widespread in Iceland, despite single parenthood (the mother more frequently) being quite common, and combined families are also common. The participants in the focus group discussions took family patterns based on heteronormativity for granted, emulating the “typical family” described above. This ‘ideological code’ of the nuclear family was very much alive throughout the discussions.

In view of the fact that issues of gender equality in Iceland have been tied to the public sphere, the participants were asked about their ideas on combining unpaid housework and paid work in the labour market. Thorsdottir’s research on the division of housework in Iceland reveals some support for the theory that households allocate time between individuals based on their relative resources so as to maximize utility. The relative resources theory “predicts that the person with greater homemaker skills will allocate more time to household work while the one with market skills will work more in paid labour” (Thorsdottir, 2007:24). Thorsdottir’s research is based on data from the International Social Survey gathered in Iceland in 2005 and reveals that “having more income relative to one’s partner decreases one’s proportion of housework” (Thorsdottir, 2007:24). In contrast to the respondents participating in the International Social Survey, the boys and the girls I spoke to replied differently to the division of housework in relation to salaries. In both the all-girls groups and in the mixed sex group, the girls unmistakably rejected the idea that the partner who earns the lower salary should bear the burden of the housework. “It does not depend on your salary how you are supposed to behave at home”, claims Elín, while Baldvin and Jónatan think that the partner who has the lower salary should “naturally” bear the burden of the housework independently of how many hours each works:

Andrea: But do you think it is by default that the partner who earns higher salary should do less housework?

Gabriel: Oh yeah!

Andrea: Even though both partners work equal hours on the job market?

Baldvin: Yes.

Jónatan: Uhum.

Andrea: How come?

Gabriel: Because *he* takes care of the wages.

Baldvin: *He* takes care of the wages.

During the discussion it was expressed among the boys that they will have a head start when they enter the labour market and that they may expect higher salaries due to the unchanged gender pay gap. The responses above reflect these ideas: not only are the boys expecting higher salaries, as *he*; they also think that by default the partner who earns the lower salary should bear the burden of housework while the other (*he*) takes care of the wages; this is in contrast with the girls ideas. Based on these ideas, the boys anticipate that women will bring the ‘gift’ (burden) of housework to their future partnerships.

3.3 ‘Born to be a housewife’

Throughout discussions in all the groups, the participants expressed the opinion that it is fair that the partner who works fewer hours in paid labour should work more hours of unpaid work at home. These ideas are in agreement with Thorsdottir’s research results which demonstrate that “working more hours related to one’s partner decreases one’s proportion of housework hours” (Thorsdottir, 2007:28). In Iceland, as in other Western countries, part time jobs are more common among female workers than male workers. I would have expected the girls to resist this idea and claim a more equal division of housework. They did not, but some pointed out that the difference in hours worked outside the home would be an important factor. One or two hours would not make much of a difference, but if the differentiation in hours worked on the

labour market became greater, the partner working less should do the larger share of the domestic work.

Bourdieu argues that since women have been “excluded from the universe of serious things, of public and especially economic affairs, women long remained confined to the domestic universe and the activities associated with the biological and social reproduction of the lineage” (2001:97). He relates these historical domestic obligations of women closely to the family and their role “to ensure the maintenance of social relations” within families (Bourdieu, 2001:97). The female domestic roles certainly are closely related to their perpetuation of family traditions, but at the same time, this sense of obligation seems to start earlier than when the actual reproduction roles become predominant. The girls are quite clearly bringing the burdens of housework with them into future partnerships. It is their obligation to negotiate domestic duties in agreement with future partners. As the participants discussed the possible division of housework in imagined future households, the girls strikingly articulated how they planned to bring with them the obligations of housework into their partnerships. They also explained that they depended on the maturity of their future partner or on their own negotiation techniques for success.

Despite what is called the “colder climate” towards gender equality evident above, the results of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) show that in general Icelanders seem to endorse liberal and progressive attitudes towards the gendered division of housework (Stefansson, 2008:38). The majority of participants in the 2002 ISSP, which focused on family life and changes in the gendered division of labour, agreed that men should participate more actively in housework and care for their children. In contrast with progressive attitudes observed, the same survey simultaneously revealed other kind of conservative views. Stefansson argues that these conservative observations do not seem consistent with participants’ attitudes towards the

gendered division of labour. Rather, it reflects a certain type of traditionalism in Icelanders' ideas about different aspirations among women and men. In the international survey, Icelanders turned out to be among the most traditional nations with respect to women's own aspirations. Iceland had the largest percentage of citizens who believe that women aspire to take care of the housework and children rather than work in paid jobs on the labour market (Stefansson, 2008:38-9).

These ISSP findings are in accord with what Holmberg (1992 in Einarsdottir, 2000) has argued to be one of the ways the sexes affirm each other as men and women. Holmberg argues that female subjugation is to be found in the unequal division of housework and in patterns of communication between men and women. Holmberg researches the factors that maintain patriarchy in people's private lives. She argues that the idea that the power-incongruity starts first when young couples establish families is a misunderstanding. In her opinion, traces of a male dominant society are also instituted among childless couples. Holmberg interviewed childless Swedish couples and discovered that male responsibilities were, in all the relationships, considered to be heavy work, even though they are not necessarily more difficult or exhausting than the jobs that are considered light. The couples did not necessarily employ the same division of housework, but what they all had in common is that the man's contribution around the house was considered more burdensome. It does not matter whether an issue of grocery shopping or minor house repairs (Holmberg, 1992, in Einarsdottir, 2000:120-1). Lars' explanation of how his parents divide their work at the guesthouse they operate together implies that he finds the financial handling of their business as exhausting as the housework it demands:

Andrea: Do any of you have a home working mom?

Lars: I do, or both my parents work at home...

Jakob: My mom used to be a housewife.

Lars: ...or they are working the same job, you know, we run a guesthouse and in that case the housework is the work of course.

Andrea: Exactly.

Lars: And it is equally divided.

Andrea: So your father does the housework equally?

Lars: Yes, yes, yes. Well except he does take care of the financial stuff.

Andrea: And your mom, she changes the bedding and things like that?

Lars: Yes.

What Holmberg's research also reveals is that women take up male values. Male values become dominant when it comes to negotiating the division of housework. Men have the upper hand when it comes to negotiating and the composition is therefore unequal. It is the role of the woman to keep the peace and to arrange issues regarding housework in order to have them discussed and negotiated (Holmberg, 1992, in Einarsdottir, 2000). As Einarsdottir points out, Holmberg's finding is not at all new to the field; it merely confirms the findings of older studies. Housework responsibilities are placed more commonly on women's shoulders than on men's. Female subjugation is perpetuated under the guise of "agreements" and "division of labour". The division is unequal from the beginning, since women have inherited the burden of housework and the responsibility to negotiate it away (Einarsdottir, 2000).

The discourse disclosed through the focus group discussion underlines Holmberg's findings. Both all-girl groups unintentionally revealed that it will be their responsibility to negotiate an equal division of housework in future partnerships. As Elísabet explains when asked if the participants find an equal division of housework important when they envisage their future partnership: "Yes, I definitely do, I would pick at my man, keep on nagging, or something". Elin goes even further when she argues: "I think it is also a little bit that way, you know, and that men

are always a little bit like kids and that we [women] need to take care of them”. Even more surprisingly, all the other girls in the group monotonously responded, “yes” to this statement.

In the other all-girls group the participants agreed that they would be dependent on how “well” the boys [ie. future partners] will mature in order for them to achieve success in negotiating housework with their future partners. Karólína’s statement reflects these ideas: “and too, maybe even though he is not helping out all that much at home while he is younger, that can change, depending on how he will mature. And also what kind of home he is later living in – how his wife is”. This response illustrates Holmberg’s claim that women are thought to be born with the burden of housework. If women do not inherit the burden of housework from birth, at least the girls have accepted that the burden is theirs before completing primary school, accepting their responsibility as housework administrators in their future homes. There was no doubt from the discussion that it should always be a female responsibility to make the negotiating process of equal division of housework function as well as possible.

The female responsibility was also evident throughout the discussions of how their parents divide housework. Comments explaining how the mothers are nagging all the time were common. Hilda stated: “I don’t know what to say, my mom is always complaining because my dad doesn’t do things [around the house] well enough”. Elísabet’s comment was similar: “My mom just insists that my dad does as much as she does around the house”. Gabríel described the same from his parents: “Yes, and mom is always nagging at my dad – ‘you never do anything around here’”. In contrast, no participant reported her or his father nagging or complaining about the mother’s performance of housework duties. The discourse of the fathers as ‘helper’ was quite common, further reflecting the female responsibility.

The boys were more easy-going about the division of housework in their future partnerships. Baldvin, for example, anticipated that his main participation in housework would be

to “dust the TV or something”. Participants in both the boys-only groups expressed their anticipation in developing technologies such as house-worker robots in the near future: “Robots, in the near future robots will have to tackle all these tasks” said Karl. The “robot-as-house-worker” discussion in the last group also revealed how feminized the tasks of housework are in the participants’ opinions:

Andrea: But do you anticipate being as industrious [as your partner] in your future homes?

All: Yes.

Nói: Or...

Jakob: Maybe about broadly.

Ísak: It depends on what you are doing in the future, I think, whether you are working from 8-6 or 9-4.

Lars: And if there will be robots around that do everything!

[Laughter]

Andrea: That’s what you are hoping for...

[More laughter]

Andrea: ...that in the next ten years or so a housework robot will be invented – there are already robot vacuum cleaners on the market, I can tell you that.

Nói: Yes, exactly.

Andrea: Brilliant stuff!

Nói: My neighbour downstairs, he has one of those robot vacuum cleaners.

Jakob: Doesn’t he have a girlfriend???

Andrea: Do you think there is less need for a robot vacuum cleaner if there is a woman in the house?

Jakob: Yes sort of – or you know, or no, no or yes!

[Short conversation on the quality of robot vacuum cleaners]

Andrea: So, I did find it interesting that you asked if he doesn't have a girlfriend...

Jakob: Yes, then she would just do the vacuum cleaning herself.

Hallur: You don't need the robot if you have girlfriend, you just push the button on her?

[Laughter]

Andrea: So you can just pick – should I have a girlfriend or robot vacuum cleaner?

Nói: This is about the robot or the girlfriend!

[Laughter]

Jakob: I would rather pick the girlfriend though.

Andrea: Even though you might have to vacuum?

Jakob: Yes, or I would make her do it, though.

Andrea: But how do you make her do it?

Jakob: Well, I don't know – she will just obey me!

Despite the humorous aspect of the above exchange, Jakob was serious when he asked if Nói's neighbour did not have a girlfriend since he was the owner of a robot vacuum cleaner. Not only does Jakob clearly think that vacuuming is a female job, but also he expects to be the 'boss' of the house. Interestingly, in a society where gender equality has supposedly been achieved, a fifteen year old boy uses the discourse of obedience when he is commenting on the relationship between men and women within the household. This excerpt underlines the point made above that young women bring the burden of housework with them into partnerships and also the argument that the discourse of girls as passive subjects is still very much alive in private discourse.

As pointed out by Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz, until recently "social scientists have used boyhood as a 'generic' paradigm for 'adolescents' (and later youth), paying little attention to the ways that girls negotiated their gendered identities" (2009:3-4). A construction of girls as passive

has been made by ignoring the process of “doing girlhood”. By focusing attention on girls’ agency when they are creating their social presence by “doing girlhood”, Currie et al. challenge the common characterization of girls as passive (Currie et al., 2009:4). Although following Currie et al. in challenging the passivity of young women, I found the girls (especially in the last group) to be surprisingly passive in identifying with traditional female roles more deeply than I would have expected to observe. At the same time, the majority of the participants believe the gendered division of labour will change when they become adults. As María declares, “I mean things are of course changing now – when our generation will be grown it will be adjusted to having more gender equality”. This optimistic belief clearly echoes the dominant discourses within the society. The attitudes towards gender equality expressed throughout my research do not put forth a promising picture of an equal division of housework in the near future. However, in the spirit of optimism offered by the adolescents, recent improvements in public policies, such as parental leave, might assist Icelanders in taking steps towards improvements in attitudes of gender equality.

3.4 ‘Family and reproduction’

Both in terms of employment rates and hours worked, labour market participation among Icelandic women is exceptionally high (Statistic Iceland, 2008c, Einarsdottir & Magnusdottir, 2005). Yet even with a culture of long working days, Iceland has among the highest fertility rates in Europe (Einarsdottir & Petursdottir, 2004). There do not appear to be signs of what has been reported in the States as the ‘opting out’ trend, when educated women are quitting careers and heading home (Stone, 2008). In light of how well Icelandic women are educated and the magnitude of their contribution in the progressive economy, there are apparent financial benefits for the government to make it easier for women to participate in the work force. One possibility

is to implement policies that make it easier for mothers and fathers to combine paid work and parenthood. The Nordic countries, including Iceland in recent decades, have for the most part presented a good example in providing public day care facilities (Gardarsdottir, 2008).

In 2000, a new act on maternity/paternity and parental leave came into effect. The act gave parents equal rights to parental leave for a total of nine months with up to 80 percent of their average total salary paid by the government. Three months are tied to the mother, three months are tied to the father, and the remaining three months the parents can divide at will. The three months tied to each parent are non-transferrable (Althingi, 2000; Eydal & Gislason, 2008, Gislason, 2007). The primary idea behind the law is that a child is entitled to care from both parents. Increasing paternal responsibility within the family aims at balancing the position of parents in the public sphere. Presumably, active participation of fathers in childcare duties will result in more responsibility for the work in having children, which with time will result in more equality in the labour market (Gislason, 2007).

Eydal and Gislason (2008:40) argue that neither political theories nor cultural theories explain why, at this point in time, these policies were enacted in Iceland. Gislason argues elsewhere that fatherhood, as a social institution, has seen greater changes in the twentieth century than ever before in history (2008:87). Although duties of fatherhood might have changed to a large extent in the last century, motherhood has most certainly been through greater changes as a social institutions as I argue above. Not only have women taken on a role of increased participation in the labour market, and at the same time fewer men have taken over the burden of housework, in this context it is interesting to observe the adolescents' ideas on the division of responsibility and caretaking.

Active participation by fathers within the home and in housework is thought to have a significant impact on children's upbringing. It is considered to have resulted in more egalitarian

attitudes among children (Gislason, 2007). The division of housework is also believed to have an effect on the status of gender roles in the labour market. If couples divide responsibility within the household, it is more likely that both can be more successful in the public sphere. However, new research from other European countries, for example Norway and Britain, has shown that increased female participation in the labour market and the implementation of policies to expand men's participation within the household have not been effective. Prior to 1994, paternal participation within the family and the household increased, but it has been at a standstill ever since (Crompton et al., 2005).

No comparable studies have been conducted in Iceland in recent years. Einarsdottir and Gislason conducted qualitative research within families that have taken advantage of the new opportunity for parental leave. They explored experiences and the impact of the new legislation on family life. They found that, despite the fact that fathers have taken parental leave, the primary responsibility for domestic work is more or less still on women's shoulders (in Johannesson, 2004). These findings are in accord with research done in other European countries. Throughout the Western world more women devote themselves to housework than men, either full time or part time (Crompton, Brockman & Lyonette, 2005).

Both men and women have expressed extensive support for public policies which promote a more equal division of housework that would enable women to integrate work and family, such as those which support good access to public daycare and parental leave (Stefansson, 2008:38). At the same time, however, results from the International Social Survey Programme reveal that the majority of Icelandic respondents think that after childbearing women should limit their participation in the labour market to part-time work (Stefansson, 2008:38). As Stefansson points out, the majority of the respondents still feel that women should rather turn to part-time work while their children are young. At the same time, the results do not indicate that people think that

the labour participation of mothers affects family life or the wellbeing of their children in a negative way (2008:38)

The participants in the focus groups were not especially outspoken about the impact of the new laws on parental leave. Nevertheless, the female participants claimed that the laws entail a positive change and many of them have absorbed the ideology behind the laws, as expressed by the participants in the last all-girls group:

Andrea: Do you think such legislation has a positive impact on getting the fathers to stay at home with their newborn too, or should decisions like this be in the hands of the parents themselves?

Linda: Well, I think it is a little bit...

Karólína: I think it is just positive, you know.

Kamilla: I think so too.

María: The dad has to get to know his baby.

Indíana: Yes, not just during the evenings.

María: And the baby also has to get to know its dad.

Participants in the mixed sex group replied in a similar way:

Andrea: In the year 2000 new laws on parental leave came into force [explains the core of the laws]. So do you think that the aim of the laws of shared responsibility between parents will result in some changes? Do you think it is important that fathers take care of their new-born?

Hilda: I guess so, aren't they likely to bond with their children?

Gústaf: Yes, of course it does matter.

Inga: I would also assume that the dad would like to spend time with his children...

Gústaf: Exactly.

Inga: ... that they would equally like to spend time with the baby.

Andrea: So it shouldn't have to be necessary to force a law like that?

Inga: No, or you know, not necessarily, I don't know how people think. Of course, she could take 3 months and he could take 3 and then she could take 3 months again.

As the participants suggested, getting fathers to know their newborn is of primary importance. Since the laws on parental leave came into force in 2000 the number of fathers using their independent rights to paternity leave has steadily increased, although recent research reveals that fathers are still using far less of the shared entitlements than mothers (Jonsdottir & Adalsteinsson, 2008:82). Additionally, Jonsdottir and Adalsteinsson's findings disclose that men, far more often than women, are involved with their job while on leave. These findings indicate that parental leave taken by men is more dependent on their job situation than is the case with women. It is also evident from the study that parental leave is more flexible when it comes to the fathers. Although men are taking parental leave in increased numbers, the difference between mothers and fathers as caregivers is still large (2008:82).

The increased number of fathers using their independent rights to paternal leave reflects strong support for the goals of the laws. The traditional breadwinner model assumes that married mothers will withdraw from the job market and retreat into the home to have children and do the housework. As can be observed from increase in female participation in the labour force, this model has been losing ground in Icelandic society for the last few decades. However, while men with families tend to have higher salaries than men without families, women's reproductive role diminishes their value on the labour market. Research on the gender pay gap, conducted in 1994, has documented this attitude towards women's childbearing capacity and its effects on their careers. The national survey demonstrated that twenty-seven percent of company directors, who were asked to describe their attitudes toward their employees having children, claimed that parenthood had a negative impact on women's careers. None of them believed that having children affected men's career in negative way (Gislason, 2007).

Interestingly, the male participants in both the all-boys' groups echoed the directors' views from 1994. While discussing possible reasons for the gender pay gap, group E suggested female reproductive roles as one of the possible reasons:

Nói: Also, men are much more stable – they don't get pregnant or anything.

Jakob: Yes, you can count on that, and they don't have to be absent.

Andrea: But they have children too?

Lars: And go on a parental leave.

Jakob: Yes, yes, but of course not very long.

Lúkas: You can have as long as the mother.

Jakob: Well yes [obviously finds it unlikely that men take as long paternal leave].

Andrea: You [men] can even take longer leave.

Lars: But women almost always take longer parental leave.

Ísak: Yes, exactly.

As Lars points out, fathers take advantage of rights for parental leave as well, but he agreed with the others that fathers tend to take shorter leave than the mothers usually do. In the first boys group, maternity leave was also suggested to be one of the reasons for why women are less prominent in politics. As Baldvin points out, "men never have to take, you know, parental leave". Contrary to these views, in Jonsdottir and Adalsteinsson's 2006 report about parents on parental leave, participating couples noted that they experienced primarily positive attitudes from both employers and coworkers. Even though it is reported that employers are slightly less supportive, this finding suggests changes in attitudes from the research in the 1990's and that the laws are now supported among employers as well as among employees. Interestingly though, this same research suggests that the gender of supervisors can be a factor when parents are deciding the

length of their parental leave. Employees tend to take longer paid parental leave if their supervisor is female (Jonsdottir & Adalsteinsson, 2008:82).

This gendered attitude toward parental leave is mirrored among the adolescents in the discussion groups as quoted above. I argue that the girls held more positive views on parental leave. During the discussion it was clear that it was much easier, and somehow more real, for the girls to talk abstractly about their future, such as having a family and work life. Therefore, they appear to understand how important laws on parental leave such as those coming into effect in 2000 will be for their future careers and family life.

3.5 “Yes, women are better caregivers”

A Gallup poll among the general population of Iceland in 2003 showed little support for essentialist claims of a biological basis for different gender roles in the public and private spheres (Gallup, 2003; Leiknisdottir, 2005). About ninety percent of male respondents and ninety-five percent of female respondents rejected the notion that men are more qualified than women to run companies, while sixty-four percent of the male respondents and eighty-two percent of the female respondent did not believe that women are more qualified than men to care for children. Research has shown that Icelandic adolescents became significantly more traditional in their views towards the gendered division of household labour between 1992 and 2006 (Hjalmsdottir, 2007). Such views are, in part, shaped through individual situations within a shifting political, economic and cultural context, but the standstill in balancing the division of domestic work and mothers’ ongoing responsibility for children is probably also an important source of their traditional attitudes towards a gendered division of labour.

Essentialist ideas about inherent male and female capabilities as caretakers of businesses or children remain restricted to a minority of the general population (Gallup, 2003; Leiknisdottir,

2005). However, a formally gender-neutral, neo-liberal ideology has been argued to have replaced essentialism as the major ideological force against affirmative action and, indeed, against the feminist movement in Iceland (Einarsdottir, 2004; Hjalmsdottir, 2007; Leiknisdottir, 2005). On this basis I would have expected the adolescent participants to hold fewer essentialist ideas about women and men as caregivers. That expectation held true of all the groups: the participants tended to refer to care-giving based on personality rather than gender. When asked if women are better qualified as caregivers than men, Linda argued, “that is very diverse”. Elín’s arguments sound similar: “I think women are more, sometimes women are just better with kids. But not always, definitely not always. Some men are better with kids, you see. Well, I don’t know. My dad, for example, is good with kids”. Although Kristján argued that women are better caregivers than men, his fellow students claimed it was more about individual traits than gender.

Gústaf had the experience of working as a summer worker in a daycare. He claimed that he experienced the attitude from his co-workers that he would not be as qualified as female workers. He claimed that he was treated differently than the girls who were also summer workers. The regular staff seemed to assume that girls were naturally more qualified to take care of the children than Gústaf was as a boy.

Focus group discussions reflected a view privileging individual choices, as well as some ideas based on gender essentialism. Among the girls, notions about how they were dependent on how well the boys would mature and grow into equality in the future are worth closer consideration. For example, Karólína argued that in part men’s success on the labour market would depend on their degree of maturity: “well, of course, the boys might mature more [than the girls] and become very responsible”. Essentialist ideas are also to be found among the boys. Baldvin claimed that “girls like children more, of course”, and other boys repeatedly indicate that women are less interested in politics and careers. Some of the comments made by the boys

claimed that men are more rational and women more emotional. The argument made by Gabríel when discussing the lack of women leaders reflects this belief: “and we don’t have menstruation – okay, okay, here is one reason, there is a woman who is a manager and she has like 200 employees to manage and then she has her menstruation...[Laughter]...and all of a sudden she only has ten employees because – you are fucking fired”. The other boys in the group found this description of a female manager very comical.

More appalling is that essentialist ideas like those expressed in Gabríel’s statement seemed to be perpetuated by the male teachers. Elín described the following incident: “Once I was very irritated at him [a male teacher] because he didn’t want to help me with something and he just asked me: ‘What, are you on your period?’ And all the boys just hahahaha and I was very shocked. I hate this question, if you are irritated you must be having your period”. Elín found this comment from the teacher offensive and humiliating. It clearly put her on the spot and embarrassed her, with classmates laughing at her as an emotional rather than rational being. If these are the messages the students receive from teachers, it is not all surprising that they themselves have essentialist notions of gender. What Elín explained underlines the importance of gender studies for all those learning to become teachers. If teachers are not aware of the difference between sex and gender it is hard to expect the students to be so.

Throughout the focus group discussions the participants in the study reflected the great emphasis that has been on the public sphere concerning gender equality issues in Iceland. When asked about what gender equality consists of they did not conceptualize housework as part of the issue. When discussing the gender division of housework, the boys expressed their anticipation of earning higher salaries and therefore having a head start when it comes to housework. By contrast, the girls clearly rejected the idea that the partner who earns the lower salary should bear the burden of the housework. Differently from the boys, the girls’ discourses on gender equality

featured a lot of contradictions. These contradictory discourses on the part of the girls were prominent throughout all the discussions but not least when discussing gendered division of housework.

At the same time as the girls rejected the idea that the partner earning the lower income should bear the burden of housework, they noticeably implied that they would bring the inherited 'gift' of housework with them in their future relationships. This idea of the female burden of housework is also reflected in how the participants' dialogue about their mothers nagging at their fathers is left un-problematized. As I anticipated the participants did not hold many essentialistic ideas about women's and men's capabilities in taking care of children and they were overall very positive concerning the legislation on parental leave. But the way the girls claimed to be subjected to the degree of the boys maturity in respect to future division of housework was a surprise. The boys misogynist comments, as concerning the female manager, were also surprising which leads into the exploration of the participants attitudes towards issues of gender equality on the public sphere.

4 The public sphere

In 1900 Icelandic women were among the first in the world to gain the same economic rights as men, and universal suffrage was gradually achieved between 1882–1915. Wage discrimination among state employees on the basis of gender was prohibited by law in 1945, and in 1961 this prohibition was extended to all private and public organizations (Einarsdottir & Blondal, 2004). The Icelandic labour market is among the most egalitarian in the world, with seventy-eight percent labour force participation among women and eighty-seven percent among men (Greig et al., 2006; Statistics Iceland, 2009b). University enrolment has risen much faster among females than males, and women made up sixty-three percent of all university students in 2008 (Statistics Iceland, 2009c). In the 1980 presidential elections, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir became the first woman in the world to be elected head of state in a general election, and the proportion of women in parliament increased from five percent in 1983 to thirty-five percent in 1999 (Statistics Iceland, 2009e). Legislation introduced in 2000 gave both fathers and mothers the right to a total of nine months parental leave with up to eighty percent of their earlier average salary paid by the government (Althingi, 2000; Gislason, 2007).

The discourse on gender equality in Iceland is mixed. There is a wide political consensus on the importance of gender equality in the society, but at the same time there is no consensus about the scope of the remaining problems (Einarsdottir & Leiknisdottir, 2007). Iceland has a good legal and formal framework regarding gender equality issues, but changes are still happening at a very slow rate. In addition to passing laws to maintain equality, different methods have also been used to achieve this goal. These methods have followed international trends, such as equal treatment, affirmative action and gender mainstreaming (Einarsdottir, 2002). The policy history of gender equality in the Western world has been divided into three overlapping

chronological stages. It is important, though, to state that the arrival of a new stage does not necessarily rule out its forerunners; the stages are intertwined and cannot be fully separated (Thorvalsdottir & Einarsdottir, 2007).

The first stage, equal treatment, is embedded in the liberal discourse on equality and the idea that men and women should be treated in the same way. In the second stage, there is recognition that special methods are needed to overcome the hindrances that women face in society, resulting in positive action or affirmative action in the hope of changing the societal structures that favoured men over women. The third stage is gender mainstreaming that now dominates all gender equality work. Currently at work in most Western countries is an effort to broaden the scope and relevance of gender equality to all policies in the attempt to change them (Thorvalsdottir & Einarsdottir, 2007). This process of gender mainstreaming applies in Iceland as well (Einarsdottir, 2002).

Gender mainstreaming approaches and affirmative action are clearly reflected in Icelandic public policy documents, yet it has been argued that the authorities have not acknowledged the radical messages they might involve. While there is consensus about policies towards gender equality, there is no consensus about the equality problems, about what outcomes should be expected out of policy implementations, or about how they should be measured (Einarsdottir & Leiknisdottir, 2007). The official understanding of gender equality is still conceptualized in an early liberal framework, which highlights formal legal rights rather than equitable outcomes. Gender equality in Iceland is structured according to a legalistic, anti-discriminatory approach focusing on women's 'deficiencies and imperfections', frequently referring to discriminatory gender patterns as result of women's free choice (Einarsdottir & Leiknisdottir, 2007). "As a result, there is a scepticism about equality programmes and measures, with the argument that they make women into victims leading to the 'victimisation' of women" (Einarsdottir & Leiknisdottir,

2007:4-5) instead of strengthening their position on the labour market, which is the aim of such programs. Elísabet's comment reflects this scepticism about gender equality programmes: "I just want to say one thing, which is you know, when a man and a woman apply for the same job and have equal education, you have to hire the woman. I find this very awkward". What has been typically left out of the discussion on anti-discriminatory law is the fact the laws are supposed to protect the rights of both women and men. The girls did not realize that if men are in the minority at a certain workplace a man should be hired to correct the imbalanced gender division at the workplace.

In everyday life in Iceland, there has been a growing complacency in political and institutionalized discourses on gender equality. Evidently, claims that full equality has already been achieved, or what little inequality there remains will simply disappear in the next few years, have often been vocalized by leading politicians, journalists, academics and other public figures (see e.g. Helgason, 2002; Oddsson, 2004; Olafsson, 2005a). Yet gender equality remains elusive in Iceland, and there is some evidence of a backlash in recent years (Einarsdottir, 2004; Hjalmsdottir, 2007; Leiknisdottir, 2005). In 2006 the difference in hourly pay between fully employed men and women was around thirty percent in Iceland, compared to an average of twenty-two percent among the twenty-seven nations of the European Union (European Commission, 2006; Ministry of Social Affairs, 2006). Women represented only eighteen percent of all Chief Executive Officers and twenty-two percent of all Boards of Directors in 2008, mostly in the sectors of education, hospitality, health and social services (Statistics Iceland, 2009a). Advances in the political arena also appear to have stalled. After the 2007 elections, for instance, women held thirty-two percent of the seats in parliament, compared to thirty percent in 2003 and thirty-five percent in 1999.

While essentialist ideas about natural male and female gender roles remain muted in Iceland, a new discourse has emerged that combines conservative gender attitudes with principles of neo-liberalism. This ideological combination frames the gender pay gap and other inequalities in social outcomes, such as gender differences in how occupations and career trajectories are freely chosen, and differences that persist between women and men regarding the intrinsic value they place on high income (Olafsson, 2005a, 2005b). This idea of gender inequality as an aggregation of women's personal choices neatly resolves the contradiction posed to neo-liberalism by unequal gender outcomes within a legal framework of formal gender equality (Crompton & Lyonette, 2005; Hakim, 2007). It also depoliticizes segregated gender roles in both the public and the private spheres, reducing these roles to a matter of individual preferences.

4.1 “People trust men rather than women”

By the turn of the 20th century advances for women in the political arena were significant. Vigdís Finnbogadóttir had become the first woman president and the proportion of women in the Icelandic parliament increased from five percent in 1983 to 35 percent in 1999 (Statistics Iceland, 2008b). However, advances in the political arena appear to have stalled. After the 2007 elections, women held thirty-two percent of the seats in parliament, compared to thirty percent in 2003 and thirty-five percent in 1999. Since 1975 equal treatment legislation has been in place in Iceland. Gender equality action in Iceland has followed international trends, from an early, liberal equal rights approach in the 1970s and 1980s to more emphasis on positive action and later gender mainstreaming. These actions were each intended to transform male-centred societal structures (Einardottir & Leiknisdottir, 2007, Einarsdottir, 2002).

Male-centered' societal structures are supported by what Bourdieu (2001) calls the '*paradox of doxa*', that is, how people follow the order of the world as we know it without conflict, and what is even more surprising, without resistance. He explains the idea as follows;

I have always been astonished by what might be called the *paradox of doxa* – the fact that the order of the world as we find it, with its one-way streets and its no-entry signs, whether literal or figurative, its obligations and its penalties, is broadly respected; that there are not more transgressions and subversions, contraventions and 'follies' (...); or, still more surprisingly, that the established order, with its relations of dominations, its rights and prerogatives, privileges and injustices, ultimately perpetuates itself so easily, apart from a few historical accidents, and that the most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural (Bourdieu, 2001:1).

Masculine domination which has been considered normal and accepted is a primary example of what Bourdieu has describes as the *paradox of doxa*. Bourdieu explains this submission as based on 'symbolic violence'.

'Symbolic violence' is not physical but rather "a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling" (Bourdieu, 2001:1-2). This last point means it becomes emotionally difficult for women to enter men's spheres. It also manifests itself in physical indicators, since women blush and experience anxiety and guilt, or fill up with the anger of the impotent (Vilhjalmsdottir, 2005:57). The idea that women are subordinate to men is a socially constructed narrative which has become believed to be 'true'. Bourdieu argues that the biological differences between the sexes "can thus appear as the natural justification of the socially constructed difference between the *genders*, and in particular of the social division of labour" (Bourdieu, 2001:11 original emphasis).

When the focus group discussions took place in November 2008, the Icelandic government was made up of four female ministers out of twelve, the highest proportion of

women in the government up to that time. When asked for a possible explanation why women have not been more involved in politics, Baldvin claimed it to be a matter of interest:

Baldvin: They just aren't as interested [as men]. [...] Maybe men just would rather pursue this kind of job or something.

Andrea: But why do you think men rather [than women] pursue political careers?

Baldvin: They are more interested.

The participants in group E had similar explanations for women's absence in politics: they simply don't run. Moreover, people trust men more than women, Kristján declared: "I think, you know, that people trust men rather than women – it has, of course, always been the way that there were only men, therefore old [male] parliamentarians have much more experience in all this, you know". And Jakob agrees: "yes exactly – instead of having, you know, some women who don't know anything about these things".

In the mixed sex group the girls rejected men's superiority as a justification for there being a minority of women in the parliament. Hilda explained this unbalance to be a matter of traditions rather than skills. Later in the discussions, she declared that she would just have to run for parliament in the future to make some changes. The same occurred in the last all-girls' group, where, after intensive discussions on gender equality, Karólína also talked about running for parliament in order to make some changes. Although these two girls demonstrated a will to take action by running for parliament, like the other girls in the all-girls groups and the mixed group they referred to old traditions as a general explanation for the difficulties in increasing the number of women in parliament. They did not argue with the boys' opinion that lack of interest could be a likely explanation.

Citing gender division based traditions, the participants did not seem very worried that women have been in the minority in the Icelandic governmental body. Among the possible explanations for their absence given by the participants was the fact it has always been like that, and while they perceived tradition as an explanation, it was also seen as a justification among both the boys as and the girls. Related to these old and ongoing traditions of female exclusion from 'ruling relations' is the idea that it is more 'manly' to want to rule:

Nói: It is of course just a fact that women have completely different interests than men.

Andrea: Well...

Jakob: Yes, exactly. This is manlier, you know.

Ísak: Yes.

Jakob: Exactly!

Lúkas: Well, it is difficult to say that it is manly to rule everything.

Jakob: No, it is manly.

Andrea: Is it manly to rule everything?

Lúkas: Yes, actually.

Jakob: Yes. [laughs]

Nói: And feminine to do what they are told to do.

Although the girls were not too concerned about the fact that women are in the minority in government and governmental institutions, they disagreed with the conclusion made in group E. As outlined above, the option of running for parliament was mentioned by two of the girls, demonstrating that they are aware of the struggle needed for change.

Regardless of women's absence from powerful positions in Icelandic society, the boys claimed that women are more dictatorial than men:

Ísak: Women are simply more dictatorial than men.

[...]

Andrea: But is that statement not a little bit, if we think about the fact that you say that women are more dictatorial but at the same time they do not have much power within the society, don't you think that is a little...

Jacob: They control something else.

Andrea: And what is this 'else'?

Lúkas: As soon as they get some...

Kristján: They get to control their own lives.

[giggle]

Jakob: That should be enough.

Lúkas: As soon as they get some power they just can't be stopped.

[giggle]

Lúkas: They just want more and more!

The other boys in the group giggled when listening to Jakob's and Lúkas's statements about female totalitarianism, but they did not reject their statements. The boys in the other group also discussed women's tendency towards 'totalitarianism'. Like their schoolmates in the last group, they had less to offer when probed and asked to explain exactly where this female dictatorship is most prominent in society.

The recent months in Iceland have been characterized by a formerly unknown disturbance. During the interview period, the political arena in Iceland was still quite stable, in the sense that the pressure on the government to resign had not become as strong as it would later on. Only a few weeks after the interviews, a period of protests in front of the parliament started which forced the government to resign. Every Saturday for months, people gathered in front of Althingi (the parliament) to pressure the government to find ways to resolve the situation and to resign. This protest proved successful. In early February, a new temporary minority government took office, led by the first female Icelandic Prime Minister, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir. For the first

time in the history of Iceland the government was formed by an equal number of women and men. New elections were announced to take place on the 25th of April, 2009. After a short and vigorous battle, the parties that made up the temporary minority government won an election victory and a new coalition majority government was formed by the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Left Green Party (LGP).

Women won a great ‘victory’ in these unexpected elections. The ratio of women in the Icelandic parliament rose from thirty-two percent in the 2007 elections to forty-three percent in the 2009 elections. The increase in the number of female parliamentarians in the ruling parties of the government certainly has much to do with these changes; both the parties have significantly more women in the uppermost seats on their ballots. This success has been achieved after implementing affirmative action in lining up ballots for elections. To the disappointment of many followers of the parties now in government, and in light of women’s success in the elections, the division of women and men in the new coalition government is not as equal as it was in the temporary government. Five women and seven men form the current Icelandic government.

This achievement during the elections also reflects an ongoing discourse within the society as a result of the financial crash in early October. All the discourses around the supposed financial success of the Icelandic bankers were heavily masculinised. The term ‘Adventurous-Vikings’ (útrásar-víkingar) was commonly used for the typically young CEO’s and managers of the banks in referring to their supposed success on the global financial market. After the crash the dialogue of more equal responsibility has been more prominent than before. This dialogue of different management styles between women and men was also prominent throughout the discussions in the focus groups, but more so concerning work than government, as will be outlined below.

For the most part, participants argued that society would not necessarily be different simply because of the presence of female parliamentarians, since styles of ruling are more individualistic. Although this opinion was evident among group C participants, some of the adolescents think about this change in a positive way:

Andrea: Do you think that our society would be different if women were in more control, maybe over forty percent of the parliamentarians instead of thirty percent?

Inga: Maybe it would be.

Kamilla: Yes.

Gústaf: It could be different.

Andrea: In what way might it be different?

[Short silence]

Hilda: Cheerful!

[Laughter]

Inga: Well, I don't know, I think more positive.

The boys had different ideas on women as leaders than expressed by Hilda and Inga. In response to the question of whether the society would be any different with a greater number of female leaders the boys in group B had the following opinions:

Andrea: Do you think that the society would be any different if more women were in ruling positions?

Karl: Yes, there would be more rules.

Jónatan: Yes, they are stricter.

Whether the girls or the boys are correct will hopefully be made clear by an increased participation of women in leading positions in the future, both in government as well as on the labour market.

4.2 “Like boss, that is just a man”

The Icelandic labour market is among the most egalitarian in the world, with seventy-eight percent labour force participation among women and eighty-seven percent among men (Greig et al., 2006; Statistics Iceland, 2009d). Nonetheless, one of the main characteristics of the Icelandic job market is a vertical division of labour, where men are more commonly in higher positions within companies than women (Einarsdottir & Blondal, 2004). Surveys have also revealed that the majority of men work at male-dominant workplaces, and the majority of women work at female-dominant workplaces (Ministry of Prime Minister, 2004). Low rates of female participation on corporate boards and as Chief Executive Officers also reflect the vertical division of the Icelandic labour market. As explained above women in Iceland represented only eighteen percent of all Chief Executive Officers and twenty-two percent of all Boards of Directors in 2006, with most of these in the sectors of education, hospitality, health and social services (Statistics Iceland, 2008a).

This vertical division of labour as well as the reality that women occupy female-dominant workplaces, such as the sectors of education, hospitality, health and social services, emphasize what Bourdieu has called the ‘three practical principles’. He argues that the old structures of sexual division are reinforced through ‘disciplines, careers and jobs’. He claims that three main rules count when women make career choices:

The *first* is that the functions appropriate to women are an extension of their domestic functions – education, care and service. The *second* is that a woman cannot have authority over men, and, other things being equal, therefore has every likelihood of being passed over in favour of a man for a position of authority and of being confined to subordinate and ancillary functions. The *third* principle gives men the monopoly over handling technical objects and machines (Bourdieu, 2001:94, emphasis mine).

As when discussing the political scene, the girls talked about how restricted society is by old traditions in light of the fact that men more commonly occupy the higher ranked positions within

society. On track with Bourdieu's argument, Hilda described her ideas about what a boss is like this way: "boss, like boss, that is just a man, you just picture it that way, and you don't picture woman as the boss, making demands like: *GO TO WORK*. You know... but that might change."

As Smith (1987:7) has argued, "within the discourses embedded in the relations of ruling, women were the Other". Hilda's statement clearly indicates that this argument is still very much alive in everyday discourses on power and the gendered division of labour. Hilda's comment illustrates what Smith calls the "ideological apparatuses" of society (1987:17), especially in schools, industry and government, for example, which she claims are mediated "by texts, by words, by numbers, and images on paper, in computers, or on TV and movie screens" (Smith, 1987:17). She claims that women have been excluded from the 'relations of ruling' with great consequences:

Being excluded, as women have been, from the making of ideology, of knowledge, and of culture means that our experience, our interests, our ways of knowing the world have not been represented in the organization of our ruling nor in the systematically developed knowledge that has entered into it (Smith, 1987:17-8).

I would have anticipated that the girls would more frequently question this social order where 'The Boss' is always male than they actually did. Despite female exclusion, this is the social order they know. Regardless of the participants' young ages, what they are familiar with gives them a feeling of security, based on either good or bad traditions.

Even though Hilda described 'the boss' as being male, an opinion which reflects Bourdieu's 'three practical principles' and Smith's 'ideological apparatus', many scholars have argued that boys are even more trapped in traditional career ideas than girls are (see e.g. Johannesson, 2004; Vilhjalmsdottir, 2003 & 2004 for Icelandic context). Essentialist ideas about gender roles and 'inherent' abilities ostensibly have more effect on boys' attitudes. Established ideas about masculinity apparently create a tighter structure for boys than for girls (Johannesson,

2004:22). Recent research in Iceland on ideas about future career choices among adolescent boys and girls reveals that girls are not as traditional as boys in their ideas regarding future careers (see e.g. Olafsson, 2004; Vilhjalmsdottir, 2003 & 2004). Bourdieu does not seem to take into account in his theories on *masculine domination* that boys' *habitus* may be even more restrictive by virtue of the advantages of domination. Since the perception and knowledge of jobs are socially experienced (Vilhjalmsdottir, 2005), in some ways girls seem to have a wider social scope when it comes to career choices.

Following Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity "as the configuration of gender practices which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and subordination of women" (Connell, 2005:77a), I noted that hegemonic masculinity was prevalent among the boys in the focus group discussions. The topic was discussed in most detail in the mixed sex group, since Gústaf had been working a summer job at a daycare. I asked him if he could consider pre-school teaching as a career:

Andrea: Would you consider studying to become pre-school teacher?

Gústaf: No, I don't think so.

[Laughter]

Andrea: Is it because of the [low] salary or just something totally different?

Gústaf: Well, I am not sure.

Inga: Isn't it just the job? [in a very understanding voice]

Gústaf: Yes, actually I wouldn't like to do this all the time. It is fine in the summer though.

Gústaf had stated earlier that he liked the job, but at the same time, he did not feel completely integrated into the workplace as the only male. Inga understood his choice not to become a pre-school teacher, which reflects how 'awkward' it is for her to imagine men in this position. Earlier

in the discussion we had talked about ideas of hegemonic masculinity and its influence on future career choices:

Inga: It is some kind of image that tells you, you know, women are nurses – you don't necessarily agree but that is the image.

Andrea: Do you think this will have some influence on you when you will choose education for a future career, now that you are going to junior college next fall and then even to university?

Inga: No, no.

Hilda: I hope not.

Inga: But it possibly may.

Andrea: What about you guys, do you imagine...

Hilda: I think it is more among the boys, you know, this is sooo ladylike [with disdain in her voice].

[Laughter]

Gústaf: Yes.

Andrea: Do you think then that masculinity, even though we have not defined it properly, do you think it is more restrictive for the boys? If we think about jobs, do you think [boys] that your choice of career is more restricted for you than it is for the girls?

Harald: I don't know?

Gústaf: Maybe a little bit.

Hilda: At least we can agree on that. It is more 'normal' to see a girl in boy-pants than to see a man in a skirt – that's not okay!

[Laughter]

Gústaf: No, that's definitely not working.

The boys in group E agreed on these ideas concerning how being a man somehow presents restrictions. After Lúkas explained how angry his stepfather got after he gave his brother a teddy bear I asked them:

Andrea: So do you think that rather more emphasis is put on boys being boys than girls being girls?

- Lúkas: Yes.
- Andrea: Do all of you agree on that?
- Jakob: I guess that is right.
- Andrea: Do you think your parents felt responsible for bringing you up as man?
- Jakob: Yes, that is the way it goes; girls can play with cars – but the boys they have to introduce to all the boys stuff, guns and stuff like that.

These issues did not come up in the girls only groups but in both the girls groups the participants raised the importance of role-models for girls on the labour market. Elísabet stated: “I think role-models would help tremendously towards progress [in gender equality]”. The discussion of role-models did not come up in the discussions among the boys-only groups as in the girls groups, as the girls claimed that the idea that women could occupy all levels of society would be inspiring when choosing future careers.

In connection with the discussion of future career choices, it was deemed significant that female dominated jobs have less respect within the society. The teaching profession is one good example of a career heavily dominated by females. Of all the teachers in Icelandic elementary schools, seventy-nine percent are women. Despite the majority of elementary school teachers being women, it was not until 2007 that female principals were more common (Statistics Iceland, 2009d). Possibly in relation to ideas on future careers, the boys spoke with more disrespect about their female teachers than the girls did:

- Ísak: Female teachers are just not as entertaining, that’s just the way it is.
- Kristján: Male teachers are just cooler!
- [Yeah]
- Andrea: Are they [men] better teachers or?
- Lúkas? They are just more entertaining, you know.
- Ísak: They are *all* so much funnier.

Andrea: Are men funnier than women?

Jakob: Yes!

Ísak: Yes, women are more serious [grim look].

As we have seen, boys in the other group referred to female teachers as the stricter ones, using stereotypes about menstruation to underline how female teachers are sometimes testy and irritable.

This finding is in concert with research by Vilhjalmsdottir (2005). Her research on adolescents' attitudes towards different professions was conducted in Iceland in 1996. When her data were analyzed with respect to gender, the biggest difference between boys and girls was in how they ranked teaching. The most observable gender difference was in their respect towards teaching, holding true for all eleven jobs the participants in the survey were asked to rank. Girls ranked elementary school teachers significantly higher on a respect scale than the boys did. According to the data from the focus group discussions, disrespect is more frequently aimed at female teachers by the boys than the male teachers. This tendency has been reported by other researches as well (see e.g. Thordardottir, 2005:47). The gendered dialogue observed among the boys was not as evident among the girls, although Elín expressed the demoralizing nature of comments made by a male teacher concerning her menstruation, as noted in the previous chapter.

Lately, and in a way related to the dialogue above, there has been growing public discussion about boys and their performance in schools, the so-called 'boys discourse'. The rising number of female teachers in the school system is often mentioned in these debates (see e.g. Einarsdottir & Magnusdottir, 2005). Some perceive this 'feminization of teaching' as a real problem within the school system and as a factor in boys' poorer performances and lower grades than girls. Johannesson (2004) claims that these issues are not simple. He points out that even though girls consistently do better in schools in Western societies, they have a long way to go

towards gender equality. Not all boys are facing problems in schools, and it is also a fact that many girls have problems within the school system. The school as an institution was established and developed by men for men, and general education for girls does not have a long history. From an historical perspective on school attendance and performance, girls have received better grades. Until recently, they left school early to become housewives. Complying with the traditional breadwinner model, boys continued their education and little attention was paid to girls' performance in school (Johannesson, 2004:27-31).

Johannesson has argued that the 'boys discourse' is partly the reason for backlash against feminism. He points out that within the 'boys discourse', feminists are to a certain extent made responsible for the problems that boys seem to be facing in schools. This kind of discourse is suited to the subversion of gender equality within schools. Johannesson further argues that the 'boys discourse' that is so closely related to schools still affects gender discourses on different levels, and that it explicitly diminishes feminist influences and gender equality on all levels of society (2004:47-51).

Within the educational system, as with other arenas of society, neoliberal ideas and market values have become prevalent. Ideas based on marketing strategies have become increasingly influential in school management. Demands for the appraisal of financial success have taken over the goal of gender equality within the National Curriculum Guide (Johannesson, 2004). 'The spirit of the times' based on individualization and free choice (McRobbie, 2004; Einarsdottir & Leiknisdottir, 2007) is reflected within the educational system. The business environment of the schools (ninety-five percent of which were run publicly by the municipalities in 2008) has become more important than the curriculum itself. Goals of gender equality and gender mainstreaming in the Icelandic school system have become less important in the discussion, and energy has been turned towards good management, economic achievements and

information technology. In the recent National Curriculum Guide the emphasis on strong individuals, better management, and financial efficiency is more prominent than are issues of gender equality, which is a change from the former curriculum (Gudbjornsdottir, 1992, 2001). Therefore, it can be argued that the National Curriculum guide has become more male centered over the recent years (Magnusdottir & Einarsdottir, 2005:158), contradicting claims that the educational system is becoming too feminine.

Despite the fact that the great majority of teachers in Icelandic elementary schools are female, it is difficult to argue that their practises are based on critical feminist ideology. The focus group discussions confirm that in elementary schools, discussion about gender equality issues has not taken place until the 10th grade, when students take a class in life-skills (lífsleikni). As Daníel explained: “no, here (in the school) these things are not discussed at all.” The messages that the students receive from their elementary school are very important for the future development of gender equality. As Smith has pointed out:

The exclusion of women from participating in creating the culture of the society is in this day largely organized by the ordinary social processes of socialization, education, work, and communication. These perform a routine, generalized, and effective repression. The educational system is an important part of this repression. (Smith, 1987:26)

It has been argued by scholars that girls are likely to be rewarded for being modest and well behaved in the classroom, which presents an even bigger problem for society than the disruptive behaviour of boys. When girls are rewarded for modest behaviour, they do not get the training needed for active participation in a society where norms are based on masculine standards (Magnusdottir, 2003). Through the educational system, students need to get the training in the “skills they need to participate at various levels in the ideological structuring of the society” (Smith, 1987:26). Feminist scholars have pointed out that gender studies should be a mandatory part of teacher education, not optional, and Adalsteinsdottir (2009) has gone so far as

to argue that the Icelandic schools have completely failed when it comes to education on gender equality issues. Magnúsdóttir and Einarssdóttir (2005:167) argue that boys' culture and the valuation of hegemonic masculinities might be a stronger influence on their weaker performance in school than the putative feminization of the educational system.

In group A, the girls claimed that they were getting different 'training' in the classroom:

Berta: [The girls] are expected to be 'docile'.

Elín: Yes, exactly!

Andrea: Do you think it matters that we are somehow trained in the school to...

Agnes: I think that there should be more focus on hindering the boys getting away with all this bullshit all the time, so they don't become so, you know, if they continue to act like this in the school they will most likely continue when they get out of the school. Since nobody stopped them right from the beginning behaving like this, they most likely think this kind of accentuated behaviour is okay.

Elísabet: Yes.

[...]

Elín: Men are like cocks, the one that crows the loudest, he simply is the fancy cock.

[Laughter]

Elín: This is how they are, and how they think and they just compete to get our attention.

Berta: Still, I think that they are much more self-assured.

Elísabet: Yes, that's right.

Despite the humour of Elín's comparison of men and cocks, this notion that the girls are expected to conform to feminine virtues and be docile makes women victims of 'symbolic violence'. At the same time, the boys 'disruptive behaviour' is more tolerated. Women are expected to happily assume the role of the servant, as well as to give themselves to a 'cause' - be docile and hard-working (Vilhjalmsdóttir, 2005:58). As findings from the International Social Survey Programme

suggest, Icelanders seem to think that the gendered division of labour is to some degree a result of different desires among women and men (Stefansson, 2008:39). According to Bourdieu, the discourses around female desires and what women are intended to do have been unified under the label of ‘calling’ (in Vilhjalmsdottir, 2005:58). He further explains:

In short, through the experience of a ‘sexually’ ordered social order and the explicit reminders addressed to them by their parents, teachers and peers, themselves endowed with principles of vision acquired in similar experience of the world, girls internalize, in the form of schemes of perception and appreciation not readily accessible to consciousness, the principles of the dominant vision which lead them to find the social order, such as it is, normal or even natural in the sense to anticipate their destiny, refusing the courses and careers from which they are anyway excluded and rushing towards those for which they are in any case destined (Bourdieu, 2001:95).

Despite verbal resistance to the ‘unfair’ system, the girls were surprisingly calm about the ‘sexually ordered social order’, using the discourse of tradition and the argument that ‘it has always been like that’ to somehow legitimize this order or perhaps to render it viable.

4.3 “I’m all for gender equality, you know”

Despite the scattered focus away from gender equality issues within the school institution in Iceland, as in the international arena, the discourse of the empowerment of women and gender equality often implies that increased education among women is the route to a more gender equal society. The suggestion is that increased education among women will result in automatic changes in the job market, such as equal salary and greater representation of women in powerful positions. For a number of years women have been the majority of university students in Iceland. University enrolment has risen much faster among females than males, and women represented sixty-three percent of all university students in the country in 2008 (Statistics Iceland, 2009d).

However, more education does not seem to automatically return benefits in the form of women’s pay envelopes, nor does it result in more power as explained above. Surveys have

shown that men with a university education get up to fifty percent higher pay than women with a university education (Ministry of Prime Minister, 2004). While the gap in education has been eliminated, the gender pay gap has not been narrowed; in fact, it is among the largest in Europe (adjusted and unadjusted) (Mosesdottir, 2007). In 2006, the difference in hourly pay between fully employed men and women was around thirty percent in Iceland, compared to an average of twenty-two percent among the twenty-seven nations of the European Union (European Commission, 2006; Ministry of Social Affairs, 2006). The gender pay gap has remained the same for over twelve years (Mosesdottir et al., 2006). Following Smith (1987:26-9), we can say that the educational system needs to offer critical thinking, but an education per se will not automatically reward women with higher salaries and powerful positions. To be rewarding, the education offered to students needs to be critical of the social structures within society and it must offer both girls and boys the necessary training to become viable subjects in the public as well as in the private sphere.

As explained earlier, the struggle for gender equality in Iceland has been preoccupied with the public sphere, focusing on issues such as wage discrimination. It was therefore surprising that some of the participants were not aware of the gender pay gap. Hilda's response when they were asked how they felt about the gender pay gap: "Is there a pay gap – now?" When discussing the reality of the gendered pay gap, the reaction among the boys and the girls was quite different. The girls found the fact of wage discrimination extremely unfair and something which needed to be changed, since they found no logical explanation for it. "This is the stupidest [idea] that, I just I, I just get mad when I think about this", said Inga. Hilda replied: "This just doesn't make any sense".

The boys were more relaxed about this fact, though aware of it. The boys in group E agreed that although a reality, it is not necessarily fair that men get higher salaries for the same

jobs. Although unfair, Núi suggested, “maybe women just don’t want as a high salary as men do”, a view reflect the discourse of gender inequalities as an aggregation of women’s personal choices. Even though this suggestion was not agreed upon among all the participants in the group, they could not come up with a possible reason for this gendered pay gap. Lars was an exception in suggesting that most often women have to negotiate their salary with male bosses, and this might influence how much [less] they are actually earning. Generally, there were few possible reasons given for the gendered pay gap in all the focus groups. Like Lars, Linda suggested that the reason was that some men are ‘male chauvinists’. These suggestions are in concert with Connell’s argument that “men and boys are thus in significant ways gatekeepers for gender equality” (Connell, 2005:1801b). Connell refers to the fact that men currently control most of the resources required to implement women’s claims for justice (Connell, 2005:1801b). This observation obviously also applies not only to wages but to other spheres of gender inequality as well.

All the participants agreed on the unfairness of the gendered division of wages. Furthermore, feminism and the struggle for gender equality have somehow crossed the borders and become too extreme (as outlined in more detail in next chapter). All the groups argued that the struggle for equal salary was necessary and it was not included in what participants called whining practices. The discussion of gendered wage differences was in part related to the boys discourse and the fact that girls are on average doing better in schools than boys. This fact was something “normal” in the boys’ opinion:

Daniel: If women start to have higher salaries there will be some kind of anarchy in the society.

[Laughter]

Lukas: Oh yeah!

Gabriel: And we would have to move to Saudi Arabia.

Jónatan: Hell yes!

Lúkas: Men just work harder for their salaries.

Andrea: They do?

Gabriel: *Yes*, they do.

Elías: *No*.

Karl: *No*.

Andrea: What do you mean by working harder?

Lúkas: I don't know, they are just more hard-working (duglegir).

As evidenced by this exchange, the boys are not in complete agreement on whether this argument is true or not. At the same time, Nói suggested that men are more industrious (duglegir) in the other all-boys' group. The idea that men are more hard-working than women was raised in both all-boys groups.

The argument that men are more industrious (duglegir) was unanimously rejected in the girls groups, as well as in the mixed sex group. In the three groups with female participants, girls referred to the fact that girls are much more industrious in the school, and therefore it is unlikely that they will all of a sudden become the lazy ones when entering the labour market. I would argue that in view of the fact that the school can be referred to as the current workplace of the participants, their comparison between the school and the (adult) labour market is noteworthy. When I asked the girls in group D if the boys were more industrious (duglegir) in school and that might be a possible reason why men deserve higher salaries they replied:

All: NO, NO

María: Not at all.

Indíana: Sorry, but no.

[...]

Kamilla: At least not as the situation is now.

In group A the reaction was very similar, and in the mixed sex group the responses were as follows:

Hilda: NO!

Inga: Definitely NOT!

Hilda: At least they [the boys] are not more industrious (duglegir) in school.

Andrea: But do you think that changes automatically when you all enter the labour force, that the boys will become more industrious and therefore deserving of higher salaries?

Inga: I really don't believe that in the old days *all* men were really hard-working in schools – I just don't believe that – that all guys had grade ten or something and the girls were just dunces [explaining the gendered pay gap being a reality for different reasons].

The reactions in the boys-only groups were somehow milder, although they were well aware of the gendered pay gap. As noted above, Baldvin and Núi suggested that men work harder for their salaries than women do. Although this suggestion was not unanimously agreed upon within the group, they all agreed that they are not as hard-working in the school as the girls are:

Hallur: Are you as hard-working (duglegir) in the school?

Lúkas: Yeess [drawling].

[Laughter]

Elías: No we are not.

Daníel: But we are more hard-working when it comes to work.

Hallur: So you are saving yourselves for the work?

Lúkas: Yes, most definitely!

The participants in both the boys groups thought the strategy of “saving” themselves was acceptable, at least from male point of view. They understood that women were struggling for equal salaries, but at the same time they strongly implied that this struggle is a female issue and

not really in their ‘range’ of concerns. When the participants in group E were asked how important gender equality was for society, they were not quite sure:

Andrea: But how important is it to attain gender equality in our society?

[Silence]

Lars: It’s important.

[Giggle]

Kristján: This is a very good question!

[Laughter]

Andrea: So maybe it isn’t all that important?

Jakob: Well it is, you know...

Kristján: Yes it is.

Jakob: Well, it can wait though.

[Laughter]

Andrea: Until you become old?

Jakob: Yes.

Kristján: Yes - no, no, I’m all for gender equality, you know.

Ísak: I don’t care.

Lúkas: It doesn’t matter for me

[Silence]

Lúkas: Well, maybe a little bit.

Andrea: Yes, doesn’t it?

Lúkas: Yes.

Kristján: It is not as important for us though.

Jakob: Exactly!

Kristján: I mean, we are just going to *lose* if it becomes reality.

Andrea: Is it more a female issue, are issues of gender equality female issues?

- Kristján: Yes, they need, you know, like with the salaries – we have high salaries so it doesn't change anything for us – we don't have to fight.
- Jakob: No, exactly.
- Lúkas: I wouldn't want men's salaries to decrease – I would prefer the women's salaries to increase.
- Andrea: Do you mean converge in the middle of the road?
- Lúkas: No!
- Jakob: Yes.
- Lúkas: But if we do that, nobody is benefitting from all this.
- Andrea: I mean, like our society is constructed today most of the households are formed by woman and man, which is how most couples are formed now...
- Lúkas: Yes?
- Andrea: And wouldn't it be nice to be in this together?
- Lúkas: Well...

The thought of losing some of the benefits of being male was difficult for the boys to handle. They did not immediately see the benefits 'of being in this together' as a couple. Their image of themselves as men was in part built on these privileges in the labour market, although still perceived as abstract and in the future. Gabríel explained how embarrassed he was when his girlfriend paid the bill when they went out for a burger. Jakob was worried that if he wouldn't have a higher salary than his future wife, he could not afford the sports channel. For him it was not only about what he could afford, it was more an issue of having control over the channels as the primary breadwinner. In the girls' opinion, gender equality was a very big issue and the gendered pay gap was unexplainable, so silly that it should be fixed as soon as possible.

4.4 Risk seekers and risk avoiders

Due to the recent economic collapse in Iceland, another gendered discourse was apparent throughout the focus group discussions. This discourse is based on essentialist and hegemonic

masculinity ideas, and the one most relevant to discussion of the economic collapse. As explained earlier, the economic ‘success’ in Iceland was founded on ideas of masculinity, where metaphors of Vikings were used to describe the bankers success, in global markets. Icelandic bankers (read: young, white males in suits) were unstoppable, but first and foremost, they were riskseeking (in a positive way). During the collapse in early October, 2008, the discourse of riskseeking became prevalent throughout all levels of society. What had been considered as the greatest advantage of the young bankers suddenly became the cause of the Icelandic financial collapse. If anywhere, the vertical division of labour was exceptionally strong within the banking institutions. All the CEOs of the Icelandic banks were men (typically in their early forties) and very few women were in leading positions.

While still considered positive, this riskseeking behaviour and the great responsibility involved was used as a justification for sky-high salaries among bankers in leading positions. It is important to point out that disposable income inequality rose to an unusual degree in the years between 1993 and 2007. What characterized this increased inequality is that a considerable portion of the disposable income of Icelandic households had gone to those with the highest income. The average income among the highest income group rose the most in this period (Kristjansson & Olafsson, 2009). The extremely high salaries within the main banks are, without a doubt, one of the reasons for the trend towards increased inequality in salaries recently. Most often these ‘extreme salaries’ were justified with the burden of great responsibility and risk in these goals. One of the main reasons that women were less successful within the banks was that they were perceived to be (naturally) less riskseeking than men are.

After the collapse, this discourse became very prominent on all levels of the society. People deliberated whether or not the collapse would have occurred if more women had been in charge. That is impossible to be sure of, but the participants in the focus groups were very aware

of this discourse and talked about it in great detail. For a period of time in the society, the idea that boys and men are more accustomed to riskseeking has been utilized as one explanation for the gendered pay gap. As Smith points out, “capitalism creates a wholly new terrain of social relations external to the local terrain and the particularities of personally mediated economic and social relations” (Smith, 1987:5). Neo-liberal ideologies that promote capitalism encourage men to take more risks, make more profit and to seek reward in higher wages. According to the participants in the focus groups, men are born to be risk-takers;

Jakob: Men are more riskseeking.

Ísak: Yes exactly, they are more riskseeking.

Andrea: Why do you think that is?

Jakob: That’s just the way it is.

Kristján: It’s just in the genes.

While the boys talk about riskseeking as something admirable, the girls have a slightly different view. As Elín suggests, “they [men] are more riskseeking; they do much more without even thinking”. At the same time as the girls had argued that management style was more about personal preference, they also strongly implied that men are more likely to be riskseekers than women. This was the case in group C:

Andrea: What about the rest of you, do you think that our society would be different. Do you think women have a different style of ruling?

Gústaf: Don’t they just take fewer risks than men do?

Hilda: They are more careful, they don’t jump in the deep end, no, no, no!

Linda also made her statement based on the idea that women are born to be more responsible: “some girls are just very responsible, it is in their nature”.

As women and men are often described as opposites, men are considered riskseeking and female risk-averse. After the collapse, contradicting the former value placed on riskseeking’s

desirability, female risk-aversion has become a tendency worth striving for. After the three main banks were taken into public ownership in early October, the financial minister nominated two women to become the temporary CEOs of two of the three banks. These nominations were just prior to my focus group discussions and fresh in the minds of the participants. In Linda's opinion, "actually, *a tonne of* women are getting jobs like that now". This argument was used in some of the other groups as well, namely that women were taking over and no one needs to be fussing about it. When I pointed out that we were only talking about two women out of so many CEOs, I received few answers. But interestingly, the participants experienced these two women (who had been working in banks for years without reaching the top positions) as embodiments of 'female domination' introduced into society.

The students were also repeating the ongoing media discourse during the first weeks after the collapse. Since Iceland was almost technically bankrupt, female responsibility became more desirable and women were handed the very difficult task of saving the newly nationalized banks. In two of the groups, one boys' group and one girls' group, I asked participants if the women were "cleaning up the mess after the men", as they have been doing at home throughout history. The boys were not sure. The girls, however, laughed, claiming that they had never really thought of it that way. Linda replied: "well, I guess women often get caught into cleaning up for others".

The participants in the study follow Bourdieu's notion of the 'paradox of doxa'. They generally accept masculine domination as normal and are likely to rationalize uneven power relations based on traditions. In the boys' opinion it is manlier to rule and according to natural gender differences women are less interested in politics and positions of ruling. The girls clearly reject these differences as based on skills or gendered skills. They talked at length about how traditions are difficult to challenge. At the same time as the girls referred to traditions as justifications of the current situation, they expressed their awareness for the need for struggle for

gender equality. Following Smith's argument that women are perceived as the 'other' within discourses of 'relations of ruling' the participants described the image of a boss as being a man.

The girls mentioned that society might become more cheerful with more women in powerful positions. On the contrary, the boys claimed women to be stricter, despite being fairly absent in powerful positions, and that they have tendencies to want to dictate. Supporting recent research, the boys' attitudes towards their female teachers were found to be less respectful than among the girls. When discussing future careers the participants endorsed ideas on hegemonic masculinity to be restrictive for boys, at the same time the girls found men's success on the labour market to be surprising, particularly in comparison with the boys' poorer average performance in school. After being more accepting of female absence in positions of power, the girls were more outspoken about the intolerable unfairness of the gendered pay gap as they could not find any logical reason for this reality. As the boys expressed support for gender equality they were not ready to 'pay the price of equality' by giving up the privileged position they clearly expected to have when entering the labour market.

The issues of 'kreppa' were contiguous with the discussions of the public sphere. Ideas based on essentialism were utilized to explain men's recent success on the financial markets due to their natural riskseeking abilities. At the same time it was claimed that one of the reasons that not many women hold management positions in companies was due to their inherited carefulness. Although the girls could not possibly find any logical reason for the gendered pay gap, and the boys supported gender equality, none of the participants agreed that feminist consciousness is crucial for further progress within the society.

5 “I am not a feminist, but...”

5.1 Female individualization

The European Union (EU) has created a model of capitalism in which social cohesion is a significant element (Walby, 2002). Iceland is not a member of the EU, but is a member of European Free Trade Association (EFTA). As an EFTA member and a European country, Iceland is to a large extent under the influence of the European model and has turned its gaze towards the Nordic countries in particular regarding communal policies. Yet in significant ways, Iceland separates itself from the other Nordic countries, all of which have long traditions as ‘egalitarian’ and ‘women friendly’ social democratic states. In contrast, Iceland has a strong tradition of a liberal political culture which emphasizes individualism and freedom from the excessive influence and guardianship of the state. Unlike the other Nordic countries, strong women’s movement in Iceland have developed alongside rather a weak machinery for institutionalizing equality (Einarsdottir & Leiknisdottir, 2007).

Changes in public policy since the 1990’s have followed ideas of extensive liberalization in the Icelandic economy - including, deregulation, privatization and market motivation - making the ideology of neo-liberalism and individualism more evident than ever before (Olafsson & Stefansson, 2005). Harvey (2006) claims that the neo-liberal state is indeed hostile to all forms of social solidarity and it seems to be true that changes in public policy have greatly affected the gender discourse in Iceland. As Harvey states, “The conflation of political freedom with freedom of the market and of trade has long been a cardinal feature of neo-liberal policy” (2006). It has been argued that the same tendency toward individualism and the discourse around women “choosing their own way of life” has emerged throughout the entire Western world.

Angela McRobbie (2004) argues that the 1990's, or thereabouts, were a turning point in feminism. This was a time in which self-critique took place in feminist theory, and, under the influence of Foucault and other theorists, feminist interest shifted away from a focus on power blocks such as the state, patriarchy and the law. The focus became on more scattered sites, conceptualizations of events or instances of power, and specific convergences and the consolidation of talk, discourse and attention (McRobbie, 2004). McRobbie employs the term 'female individualization' in drawing on the concept of individualization as discussed by modern sociologists. In the new period of modernization, individuals are increasingly called upon to conceive their own life plans. The second period of modernization allows people to become more independent and to be able to make their own futures. In the Western world, feminism and individualism have developed hand-in-hand as the former came to be identified with liberation from patriarchal constraints. The right for women to have public lives became the way to resist being confined to the role of wife and/or mother (Eisenstein, 2005).

According to this view, women are now free from institutions where gender roles are settled. When the force of structure fades away and people are individually responsible for making the lives they want to live, their capacity for agency increases. Personal choice and self-improvement are given emphasis (McRobbie, 2004; Tasker & Negra, 2007; Gill, 2007; Currie et al., 2009). McRobbie claims that some influential contemporary thinkers pay no attention to the production of new realms of injury and injustice. As an example she refers to the works of thinkers like Giddens and Beck. In McRobbie's opinion these thinkers lay out this optimistic neo-liberal viewpoint in the following way,

In their writing, there are only distant echoes (if that) of the feminist struggles that were required to produce the newfound freedoms of young women in the West. There is little trace of the battles fought, of the power struggles embarked upon, of the enduring inequities that still mark out the relations between men and women. All of this is airbrushed out of existence on the basis that, as they

claim, “emancipatory politics” has given way instead to life politics (McRobbie, 2007:35).

She underlines their “shallow” reference to the struggle for gender equality by noting the film *Bridget Jones’ Diary* as an illustration of their sociological themes (McRobbie, 2007). Bridget Jones, a product of modernity, embodies modern women’s freedom from tradition and their agency to live an independent life. At age thirty Bridget is “a free agent, single and childless and able to enjoy herself in pubs, bars and restaurants” (McRobbie, 2007:36).

In her article, “Post Feminism and Popular Culture”, McRobbie (2004) asks why feminism is so underappreciated today and why young women seem to recoil in horror at the idea of feminism. These questions are directly related to the standstill (Einarsdottir, 2004) or even backlash (Faludi, 1992) found in many Western countries. In harmony with a rising discourse of individualism in Iceland, a discourse emphasizing a woman’s free choice to structure her life and determine her own life pattern has been dominant in recent years. This discourse is echoed in Elín’s statement on women’s position in the public sphere: “the interest, that is all you need”. Many argue that the main causes of gender inequality are found in women’s own views and attitudes and their lack of will to take responsibility within the public sphere (Einarsdottir & Leiknisdottir, 2007). This view is reflected quite clearly in one of the boys’ groups. When asked for a possible reason why women seem to be less likely to go into politics, the following exchange ensued:

Kristján: I think they [women] are just less interested in these things [politics] than men are.

Lúkas: Yes, exactly.

Hallur: Did you say less interested?

Kristján: Yes, they are simply less interested than men.

Jakob: Women don’t bother about things like that.

Andrea: Do they prefer to stay at home?

Jakob: [Laughs] Yes, taking care of some neat-freak stuff.

Kristján: I wouldn't like to go to Althingi [the parliament] myself.

Nói: It is naturally a fact that women just have completely different interests than men do.

Jakob: Yes, exactly. This is manlier, you know.

This discourse of personal choice can be double-edged, however, and Mohanty (2003:229) has pointed out that “the hegemony of neo-liberalism, alongside the naturalization of capitalist values, influences the ability to make choices on one’s behalf in daily life.”

Various governments have been inviting young women, based on ideas of female individualization, to consider that they are free to compete in education and work as fortunate subjects of the new meritocracy (McRobbie, 2004). The ethos of individualism and free choice has affected the discourse on gender equality in Iceland. The belief that gender discrimination in the labour market is simply a matter of a straightforward interaction of supply and demand for individual skills that will be corrected by market forces, as in the case of other ‘market failures’, is common in the discourse on equality and free markets (Einarsdottir & Leiknisdottir, 2007). This bias certainty has affected collective struggle for gender equality.

Although the discourse on women as “individual failures” has been quite vigorous, it is at the same time refuted in the findings of a Gallup poll among the general population in Iceland in 2003. The Gender Equality Attitude Survey was conducted on behalf of the Centre for Gender Research at the University of Iceland. Using answers from fourteen of the survey questions, Leiknisdottir (2005) constructed a gender equality index. She based her index on the replies to questions concerning work, the household, family life, politics and leadership. Her findings contradict the popular public discourse on how gender (in)equality is caused by women’s choices, attitudes and views. If the reason for stagnation in gender discrimination was to be found

within the attitudes and views of women themselves, they would be expected to score lower on the index. Instead, women are more supportive of changes towards gender equality than men, regardless of age, education and employment status (Einarsdottir & Leiknisdottir, 2007).

5.2 Postfeminism

During the 1990's, the postfeminism discourse made its appearance within popular culture, catching the attention of gender and media studies. Some scholars have argued that there is no agreement on what postfeminism is (Gill, 2007:148; Hall & Rodriguez, 2003:878). Gill argues that after nearly two decades of arguments about postfeminism, "there is still no agreement on what it is and the term is used variously and contradictorily to signal a theoretical position, a type of feminism after the Second Wave, or a regressive political stance" (2007:148). Despite disagreements, the notion of postfeminism has become important within feminist studies. In this literature there is general consensus among scholars that "postfeminism broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the 'pastness' of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated" (Tasker & Negra, 2007:1). Similarly, McRobbie understands "postfeminism to refer to an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s come to be undermined. It proposes that, through an array of machinations, elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to 'feminism'" (2007:27).

As Tasker and Negra point out, resistance towards feminism is not a new trend, but they claim what is exceptional "about contemporary postfeminism is precisely the extent to which selectively defined feminism has been so overtly 'taken into account' ... albeit in order 'to emphasize that it is no longer needed'" (2007:1). Others have observed postfeminism as a clear

response to feminism (Gill, 2007) which provides “a more complex relationship between culture, politics and feminism than the more familiar framing of the concept ‘backlash’ allows” (Tasker & Negra, 2007:1) because of the tendency to enmesh both anti-feminist and feminist discourses within postfeminist culture (Gill, 2007:163).

On the path of finding an acceptable idea of postfeminism, Gill offers a new understanding of postfeminism for use in analyzing what she calls “contemporary cultural products”. She argues “that postfeminism is best thought of as a sensibility that characterizes an increasing number of films, television shows, advertisements and other media products” (2007:148). Postfeminism should be considered as a ‘sensibility’ rather than understood as an epistemological perspective, historical shift, or backlash. Thinking about postfeminism as a sensibility allows scholars to inquire into media culture, which should be a “critical objective rather than an analytical perspective” (Gill, 2007). The advantage of the sensibility approach is that “it does not require a static notion of one single authentic feminism as a comparison point, but instead is informed by postmodernist and constructionist perspectives and seeks to examine what is distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender in the media” (Gill, 2007:148). The contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses is given emphasis through this new approach, along with the complexity of both feminism and anti-feminist themes within the postmodern discourse itself (Gill, 2007).

Following Gill’s suggestion, Tasker and Negra situate postfeminism among what they identify as the other “posts”, that is, postmodernism and post-civil-rights discourses. They further argue that “these three ‘posts’ (postfeminism, postmodernism and post-civil-rights) involve an implicit understanding of history and historical changes”. They claim that postfeminism like postmodernism “involves a particular relationship to late capitalist culture and the forms of work, leisure, and crucially, consumption that thrive within that culture” (Tasker & Negra, 2007:6).

In recent years, neo-liberalism has increasingly been highlighted as a problem by a number of writers as a shift away from being merely “a political or economical rationality to a mode of governmentality that operates across range of social spheres” (Gill, 2007:163). Neo-liberal individuals are constructed as entrepreneurial actors who through rationality, calculation and self-regulation bear full responsibility for their own life biography. As if to underline what has been described as the profound relationship between neo-liberalism and postfeminism, these characteristics of individual autonomy, choice and self-improvement are also manifestly constituted by postfeminism (Gill, 2007:163). These ‘postfeminist characteristics’ are reflected in Karl’s ideas on femininity:

Andrea: What about femininity - how would you describe femininity?

Karl: To ask for money even though you have almost everything that you need, to **buy** endless amounts of clothes, even after you [read: women] have filled up the closet you are even still whining about how you need more. Even though you have worn some of the clothes only once, you need to **buy** more and more and more...

Performing agency through consumption practices is a quite prominent theme in postfeminist culture. Tastes and lifestyles have become much more important elements of some women’s feminine identity “than ethnicity, class or religion ties could ever be” (Tasker & Negra, 2007:11). The notions of choice are central to postfeminism. The notion of a choice to ‘be oneself’ and to ‘please oneself’, supported by the grammar of individualism, has spread throughout Western media culture. Personal choice and self-determination are refracted through women’s everyday lives (Gill, 2007). As Genz argues, postfeminism participates in “the discourses of capitalism and neo-liberalism that encourage women to concentrate on their private lives and consumer capacities as the sites for self-expression and agency” (Genz, 2006:337-8). She recognizes that an emphasis on agency as consumption can be seen as a ‘politically impure practice’, or even as feminist resistance.

5.3 'Can-do girl power'

The participants in the focus group discussions were all raised in this era of postfeminist culture. Although the concept of postfeminism has not been prominent in Icelandic gender studies or gender discourses, all the characteristics of 'postfeminist/modern' culture in Western societies are very quite evident in Iceland. Despite the fact that Icelanders are few in number and geographically isolated, the Icelandic media broadcast predominantly American television sitcoms and drama, including reality shows of all kinds (Stefansdottir, 2007). The average Icelandic citizen is very well connected with the outside world through wide ownership of computers and access to high-speed internet connections (Olafsson & Stefansson, 2005).

Emphasis on the individual autonomy of the neo-liberal subject and the notion 'of having it all' were both quite prominent throughout the focus group discussions. This notion is what Sanders calls the postfeminist dialect, based as it is on the assumption that feminist goals have already been achieved, that endless options are now available, and that all a modern woman has to do is simply choose her individual way to go (Sanders, 2007). None of the girls (or the boys) expressed the will to become stay-at-home mothers (or fathers). When the girls were asked if they imagined themselves having employment in the future, they (all at once) replied in almost an astonished manner: '*of course*'. Equally, the boys expressed the expectation of having future wives who would actively participate in the labour market. As explained above, Iceland has (at least until now) been a very affluent society which has mostly followed the Nordic welfare model in providing universal education and health care. Every university student has access to a governmental student loan which has made secondary education a 'real' possibility for a broad range of people. Moreover tuition fees in Icelandic universities are extremely low.

From the group discussions as a whole it can be assumed that the vast majority of my interviewees are aiming for secondary education and work. In short they can choose to do whatever they like. As Elín declared, “I am going to be a lawyer – why – because I think Ally McBeal is funny”. Elín’s statement predicates a connection to popular TV series, such as “Ally McBeal”, “Sex and the City” and “Desperate Housewives”, which have been dominant within the discourse of postfeminism. American and British sitcoms and reality shows are among the most popular television material watched among Icelandic teenagers (Stefansdottir, 2007). While Elín specified Ally McBeal as a role model, popular TV shows and femininity are quite related in the boys opinion. In both the boys’ groups, discussion of what they called ‘soap-operas’ emerged around the discussion of femininity. When probed about what kind of programs would be defined as soap-operas, the boys agreed on a quite broad definition, from “Guiding Light” to “Sex and the City”.

The cult of youth has become central within contemporary media culture. Tasker and Negra point out that as feminism has been left behind, anxiety about aging has become prominent within postfeminist representational culture (2007:11). A heightened culture of girls has emerged parallel to postfeminist discourses and it has been argued that these two are in fact dependent on each other (Projansky, 2007). In Projansky’s opinion there are several reasons for co-deployment of postfeminism and girl culture. One is that youthful femininity has become the focus of contemporary popular culture, of which both girlness and postfeminism can be regarded as a part. Another reason is what she claims to be the cultural obsession with girlhood, which can be read as a response to postfeminism, since adolescent “girlness” epitomizes postfeminism. Turning towards girls might also be a way to keep postfeminism fresh in the context of contemporary commodity culture (Projansky, 2007:44-5).

Like postfeminism, 'girlhood' has received increased attention in recent years in both the popular media as well as academia. Early feminist work was characterized by girlhood being defined against womanhood and signified in a negative way (Currie et al., 2009:4). Following the emergence of the 'girl power' movement during the 1990's, female rock bands started to emphasize the longing to make things better for girls. Although packed with contradictory meaning, 'girl power' became the 'new trend' among various female musicians catching the ears of young girls in the West. Recently, girls have increasingly become recognized as agents and at present scholars consider girlhood as an important social category. The idiom 'girl power' has been the subject of much research "in terms of cultural production both *for* girls and *by* girls, through what girls consume and what they produce" (Currie et al., 2009:8, original emphasis).

Gill has pointed out that there is a paradox between the celebration of 'can-do girl power' on the one hand, while on the other hand "their bodies are powerfully reinscribed as sexual objects; women are presented as active, desiring subjects, but they are subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance which has no historical precedent" (Gill, 2007:163). Similarly, Sanders points out different but also contradictory relationships of girl power and consumerism when she argues that:

With the emergence of laddette culture and girl power, discourses of female empowerment focused on young women's and teenage girls' engagement with popular culture and reformulations of feminist discourses regarding social behavior and consumerism (Sanders, 2007:76).

Additionally, Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz (2009:9-10) suggest that the implication of feminism in young women's lives is not always clear and is, in fact, a very complex one. In their discussion of the meaning of 'girl power' and its implications on meaning of girlhood today, Currie et al. point out that:

What cannot be ignored is the way in which "girl power", as an everyday expression, has become shorthand way to explain dramatic changes that

characterize the state of girlhood today. Although a contested term, it implies that girls have been “liberated” from the kinds of constraints identified by second wave feminists. Within popular consciousness, girl power positions girls as ambitious, success bound, and independent, and thus celebrates youthful femininity and individualism (2009:29).

Female rock bands as “The Spice Girls” were popular in Iceland during their heydays but there was not as widespread a movement for girls’ empowerment in Iceland as there was in North America and elsewhere. Nevertheless, the girl participants in the focus group discussions expressed the notion of having been “liberated” from the restraints of an “older” gender un-equal society, claiming feminism to be out of date.

5.4 ‘I’m not a feminist but...’

Recent research has indicated a paradox for the feminist movement. While most people support egalitarian gender roles, and although young women are considered “ambitious, success bound and independent”, very few people self-identify as feminist. Support for feminism seems to be decreasing as well (Houvouras & Carter, 2008:234). This fact has raised concerns among many feminist scholars and activists over the status of the feminist movement. A wide range of explanations for the inconsistencies between high levels of feminist principles and low levels of identification with the feminist movement has been offered, “from analysis of feminism as a feminist movement to studies of individuals’ identities, perceptions, and behaviours” (Houvouras & Carter, 2008:235).

McRobbie argues that “the media has become the key site for defining codes of sexual conduct. They cast judgment and establish the rules of play. Across these many channels of communication, feminism is routinely disparaged” (2007:31). Some scholars have suggested that core ideas of feminism have become more and more integrated into peoples’ everyday lives and therefore may be less noticeably feminist. Others argue, in the same vein as McRobbie, that the

decrease in feminist identification today is a result of hostility towards the feminist movement and the general negativity of its representation. A more sympathetic view suggests that the feminist movement is now simply waiting for the appropriate political climate to rejuvenate, and therefore is currently in a 'holding pattern' (Houvouras & Carter, 2008:235).

The argument by Currie et al. is exemplified by the girls in the study, who as 'daughters of postfeminist culture' express very clearly the postfeminist dialectic of feminism as out of date phenomenon:

The prevailing discourses on girl power appear largely to share the common sense assumption that [...] feminism is "dead," and girls today, although in trouble, are without politics and without the need for collective deliberation, evaluation or action to solve problems. Such a discourse works to limit girls' access to feminism as a discourse that names their experiences and links these experiences and feelings to the ongoing quest for social justice (Currie et al., 2009:31).

As mentioned above, McRobbie asks "why feminism is so hated and why young women recoil in horror at the very idea of feminism" (McRobbie, 2007:31-2). 'To recoil in horror' might overstate the reaction toward feminism in the girls' focus groups, but what is clearly not an overstatement is that the girls distance themselves very clearly from feminists and feminism. They articulate feminism not only as out of date, but also as being too extreme, taking 'things' too far. As Tasker and Negra (2007:19) have pointed out, these views can be expected of the popular mode of postfeminism. In group A, the girls expressed these opinions when asked about their ideas on feminism;

Elín: Well, I don't know, maybe the reason for this [struggle for gender equality] was much more relevant 20 years ago, but I don't, I think there is not as big reason for making fuss about it now. I think things have become fine just as they are, you know.

Andrea: You think it has become fine?

Berta: It is not as much.

Elín: I think the line has been crossed in some ways...

Berta: Yes, yes, it has become little bit exaggerated

[...]

Andrea: Well, so you think that gender equality has been achieved and we don't need to...

Elín: Not totally. But I think, well I don't know, I think some women today do not know what they are fighting for anymore.

Agnes: Yes, they are just trying to figure something out.

Elín: Yes, they are just trying to figure whatever out.

Agnes: I find it so uncool.

Elín: I just can't stand people that are bitter!

[Laughter]

Elín: I am talking about these 'women' [feminists], you see.

As expressed here, in the girls' opinion, feminists seem to have lost track of what they are really struggling for, and since they have lost track they tend to exaggerate things and 'cross the line'. It was not clear, however, what 'line' had been crossed. The claim that feminism was much more relevant twenty years ago suggests that it is out of date and not appropriate to contemporary society.

In group D, the participants expressed similar thoughts on the feminist struggle for gender equality. Karólína for example claimed that "obviously there has been a lot – you know - things have changed so much since the old days". This statement was followed by similar statements in group A:

Silja: I think feminism sometimes just becomes too much.

Karólína: Yes.

Silja: Like I heard that in some hospital the women [feminist] went crazy because the toddlers wore dresses in pink and blue when born.

Karólína: Yes, I think sometime it [feminism] just crosses the line

[...]

Silja: I just find it so irritating when a fuss is made about something of such small importance.

These girls in group D claimed that they have not had very much education on feminism and therefore could not discuss it in detail. As explained in the chapter on group dynamics, group D was formed by ‘the popular girls’ and they were observably less opinionated than group A. They explained gender differences more as a matter of maturity among girls and boys and based on individual choices. This lack of expression is interesting in relation to McRobbie’s statement on how to count as modern girls/women. She argues, “Thus, the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique in order to count as a modern sophisticated girl” (McRobbie, 2007:32). I argue that the girls in group D are not especially ‘passive’; rather, they are fulfilling an image of the modern young women as McRobbie’s statement suggests.

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (de Beauvoir, 1989). Unexpectedly, the participants in both all-girls groups took an example of this idea to illustrate how extreme Icelandic feminists are. In May 2007, Kolbrún Halldórsdóttir, a parliamentarian on behalf of the Left Green Movement, asked the Minister of Health to inquire into the origin of the tradition in Icelandic hospitals to dress new-born girls in pink and new-born boys in blue and for boys to have blue wristlets and the girls have pink ones. She asked the Minister if he thought there would be grounds to change this tradition. Although, the case was discussed for only fifteen minutes in the parliament, it caught a lot of attention from the media. The core idea of Halldórsdóttir query was based on ideas about the “proper” socialization of boys and girls from birth. The parliamentarian suggested that instead of using gender associated colours as pink and blue, the hospitals could offer white clothes or other less gender-associated colours for newborns. The Minister of Health was perfectly happy with the way things were and did not think there was

reason enough to make a centralized order to change the colours of clothes for newborns in Icelandic hospitals.

As reflected in the discussion groups, media attention around the matter was very negative. Many people raised their voices, through blogs and talk shows, on the insignificance of the case and claimed that Halldórsdóttir, a parliamentarian and a feminist, was wasting the Althingi's very valuable time. In opposition to the mainstream media debate, feminists spoke on the importance of the matter. But as can be observed from the dialogue among the girls, this case was underlined in the public discourse as an example of how extreme feminists have become. No attention was paid to the real message of the inquiry: to achieve gender equality within the society we might have to begin right from the beginning, from birth.

Even though the girls in the first group did not hold an absolutely 'positive' image of feminists, and replied with a *fart* sound followed by group laughter when asked about their opinions about feminism, they held contradictory ideas and the power of a good role model was clearly articulated in the group, as shown here:

Andrea: But what do you think, do you discuss feminism in school, or where do you get all your information on feminism from?

Berta: No.

Elísabet: No, that has not been discussed...

Agnes: My mom is a crazy feminist – and I have all my information from her.

Elísabet: Ohh yes she IS a feminist!!

Agnes: My mom always becomes crazy happy if some woman, like, great that this woman is a CEO of a bank and she is just so happy about it.

[Laughter]

Berta: My mom just doesn't bother doing things like that – she doesn't think it is worth the hassle.

Andrea: But do you experience it as negative [her mother being a feminist]?

Agnes: No, no but she is just so ext... of course I know that she doing all this with good intentions.

Andrea: Yes.

Agnes: But she is probably the most dedicated feminist I have met, she is, when she becomes very extreme, it is sometimes irritating, but I mean...

Even though Agnes claimed that her mother is a ‘crazy feminist’ and the girls joke around about how dedicated a feminist she is, it was important for the girls to know a feminist and realize that, despite advocating for women all the time, a feminist could be someone as “normal” as a friend’s or classmate’s mother. Of all the participants, only Agnes expressed having either a mom or dad who is a feminist. None of the other fifty-six parents seemed to be professed feminists, or at least none of the participants dared to make such a claim.

In group C, the participants were not certain about the definition of feminism. As Kamilla said, “I hear this word so often [feminism] – ohhh these feminists [said in negative tone] or something like that – but I don’t even know what it means”. When given the very basic definition of feminism they replied:

Hilda: Well, isn’t it good to be feminist then?

Kamilla: Yes, yeah.

Hilda: I think that all the nation should be on the same team, not men against women – what kind of bullshit is that?

[...]

Andrea: What about you guys, you haven’t really commented on this?

Gústaf: I think sometimes like feminists, at least some, are too extreme or even that they want women to have more.

Although postfeminist culture has turned its gaze towards girls and women, and the discourse of the girls in the focus groups reflects what many scholars have described as a postfeminist influence, these opinions were no less reflected among the boys’ responses towards feminism. In

both the boys-only groups, opinions about feminism were quite strong and not positive. In group E, “whining [as a trait of women]” was a theme throughout the whole discussion. When repeatedly probed on what they meant by women whining all the time, the boys could not really reply; it was just something they believed every woman does (almost) all the time:

Andrea: I would like to ask you about feminism, what are your opinions on feminism?

Lúkas: Aren't they women that are always whining?

Jakob: Yes!

Lars: Yes, feminist are those women who are always whining and are bitter.

[Laughter]

Nói: It is not only women. Didn't Oskar carry a button like that?

Jakob: There are probably some okay feminists out there.

Nói: It probably varies.

Lars: Some of them are just whining all the time.

Lúkas: We have one feminist in our class and she messes with us all the time. Saying that we are so much....

Nói: Feminist, are you talking about [suggests girls name which is audible]?

Andrea: But what about all this whining, you talk about feminists as being whiners, what kind of whining are you talking about?

Lars: They are whining about women being better than men.

Lúkas: Yes, and...

Jakob: Yes exactly!

Lúkas: And maybe they are just not...

Lars: They aren't better at all.

Lúkas: ...as good.

[Giggling]

Lars: They just always think that they are better.

Andrea: To demand equal salary, is that whining?

Jakob: No.

Lúkas: No.

During this exchange Núi and Jakob suggest that there might be okay feminists out there but later in the discussion they also used the phrase ‘whining’ when referring to female struggles for gender equality. From a micro-level perspective, many scholars have argued that individuals fail to identify with the feminist movement by rejecting negative perceptions and stereotypes connected with feminism (Houvouras & Carter, 2008:235). The same holds true for the students in this study. As expressed in the exchange above, most of the participants drew negative or even extreme pictures of feminists. In group B the participants’ articulated strong opinions about feminists:

Andrea: I would like to ask you about feminism.

[Laughter]

Gabriel: Shit, I am telling you that...

Elías: Don’t get started, don’t get started!!

Gabriel: I am always picking on feminists.

Andrea: What do you think of feminists?

Daniel: Heavy!! I don’t have so much of an opinion about feminist.

Gabriel: Something like, “I’m too lazy to shave”!

[Short silence]

Gabriel: Feminists are so many witches!

Andrea: But are they any different from other women, or male feminists?

Gabriel: They just have never heard about shavers!

[Laughter]

Andrea: Where have you seen hairy feminists?

Gabriel: On the internet – there is a website called ‘hairy feminists’.

Karl: Are you sure you did not see it in your bed?

Gabriel: I'm positive. I don't have sex with feminists!

All the participants in the boys groups supported the struggle for equal salary, but interestingly, the discourse around whining was prominent throughout the discussion in both, but not in the girls' groups. In the 'spirit' of postfeminism all the groups suggested that feminism was something out of date, and as Elín stated above, the participants believe feminists have lost sight of what they are struggling for. In the opinion of the 10th graders in my study, feminism symbolizes something old, which they do not identify with at all. Their youthfulness brings them hope for something different from feminist struggles for gender equality. Linda for example said: "I mean, it is of course changing now – when our generation will grow up we will be adjusted to more gender equality". This claim underlines Tasker and Negra's statement that "As postfeminism has raised the premium of youthfulness, it has installed an image of feminism as 'old', as well as the certainty that generational difference is going to bring better times" (2007:11).

At the same time that fewer people self-identify as feminists, support for more egalitarian gender roles has increased. The slogan "I'm not a feminist but..." is becoming more widely used as it seems to suggest that a new version of feminism is necessary, at least in Hall's and Rodriquez's opinion, if it is going to find credence among more women. They also point out that the presence of fewer self-identified feminists could possibly even reduce support for the feminist movement in the future (2003:898). The views expressed in the focus group discussions on feminism suggest a trend away from the feminist movement, now and in the near future. It can be concluded that the discourse of free choice and the increasing emphasis on individualism have been harmful to the struggle of the feminist movement for gender equality in Iceland. Young women are expected to compete on an individual level and to change the structure of society

without more autonomous feminist politics. Feminism has been displaced as a political movement (McRobbie, 2004).

Following Currie et al.'s suggestion, it is more important than ever for the feminist movement "to be open to new and diverse possibilities that will bring new and diverse subjects to the fore, thereby continually reconstructing feminism" (2009:21). As Tasker and Negra claim, "postfeminist discourses rarely express the explicit view that feminist politics should be rejected; rather, it is by virtue of feminism's success that it is seen to have been superseded" (2007:5). There might be the possibility for young women to 're-connect' to feminist politics in a postmodern era. Or as McRobbie argues, "postfeminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings, which emphasize that it is no longer needed, that it is a spent force. [...] Postfeminism permits the close examination of a number of intersecting but also conflicting currents" (2007:28).

The postfeminist dialect of women as free agents which have been liberated from the restraints of older gender in-equal society was prominent throughout the discussion with the girls. This study supports research findings which report less feminist self-identification among young people. The girls, not to mention the boys, clearly distanced themselves from feminism. Following McRobbie's argument that weaker feminist identification among young people is a consequence of hostility towards the feminists, the participants expressed negative attitudes towards the feminist movement. Not only did they claim that feminism is out of date and unnecessary, both girls and boys articulate feminists as being too extreme, bitter and losing track of what they are fighting for.

The girls' negative notions of feminism are in stark contrast with their earlier articulations of how necessary collective struggle is for progressive changes in society. While they have

expressed the awareness of the need for collective struggle they have adopted the neo-liberal discourses in which they are expected to compete on individual level to attain their personal choices. In their opinion, autonomous feminist politics are old fashioned and very uncool and they do not perceive it as an ground for a collective struggle, at least not for now. Throughout the discussions the girls raised the importance of role models. In that context, interestingly, only one of the participants confide in having a self-identified feminist as a parent. Similarly the participants claimed that had very little education on feminism within the school. This suggests that the adolescents are receiving most of their knowledge on feminism from the media. The attitudes revealed in the focus group discussion do not suggest a very positive cover for feminism in contemporary pop culture.

6 “Back from the future”

6.1 The gendered ‘habitus’

Despite the fact that each of the all-girls’ and the all-boys groups were quite different in composition, the general messages from the groups were similar. These similarities were especially pronounced in the two all-boys groups. The make-up of the participants in the two all-boys groups was very different; when we started the group E discussion I anticipated observing very different attitudes from those in the first boys’ discussions. The ‘easy going’ group of boys expressed similar ideas on gender equality as the ‘big-mouthed’ boys in the first group. The exercise of hegemonic masculinity was certainly there, but just more concealed. What they said was not different, the difference was rather how they said it. The boys’ experienced themselves as a part of the ‘male team’ and they were well aware of their privileged positions as males. Although they were laid back in their chairs, happy to participate in the focus group discussions on gender equality, they did not consider the topic as to be really within their field of consideration.

A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man. The terms *masculine* and *feminine* are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas women represent only the negative, defined by limited criteria, without reciprocity (de Beauvoir, 1989:xxi).

The boys in both all-boys groups certainly felt that they belonged to the ‘neutral’ half of human beings; they were the referents for “human”. Their behaviour and expressions underlined Bourdieu’s argument that “the strength of the masculine order is seen in the fact that it dispenses with justifications: the androcentric vision imposes itself as neutral and has no need to spell itself out in the discourse aimed at legitimating it” (2001:9). The boys’ spoke on behalf of those that

have the “authority of the impersonal, the neutral, the detached and the factual” (Smith, 1989:53). It is interesting to keep in mind that the participants were only fifteen years old at the time of the focus group discussions. It could be assumed that when young adults enter the labour market or establish families, certainty about their authority would be sharpened as the gendered division of labour becomes more evident. From the male participants’ contributions during the focus group discussions, it can be assumed that the notion of “men’s standpoint represented as universal” (Smith, 1989:19) is part of the boys consciousness from an early age.

As Smith points out, men more frequently occupy the positions of power in society. She argues that this fact “means that our forms of thought put together a view of the world from a place women do not occupy” (1989:19). She further argues that “the forms of thought we make use of to think about ourselves and our society are part of the relations of ruling and hence originate in positions of power” (1989:19). The key words ‘men’ and ‘women’ can be replaced with the words ‘boys’ and ‘girls’, at least in the case of these students as young as fifteen years old and probably much younger. In contemporary Iceland, although one of the most ‘gender equal’ countries in the world, it is apparent that despite optimistic discourses the reality fits Bourdieu’s description of the gendered social order:

The social order functions as an immense symbolic machine tending to ratify the masculine domination on which it is founded: the sexual division of labor, a very strict distribution of the activities assigned to each sex, of their place, time and instruments; it is the structure of space, with the opposition between the place of assembly or the market, reserved for men, and the house, reserved for women, or within the house, between the male part, the heart, and the female part – the stable, the water and the vegetable stores; it is the structure of time, the day and the farming year, or the cycle of life, with its male moments of rupture and the long female periods of gestation (2001:10-1).

As is apparent throughout this thesis, the boys situate themselves outside the struggle for gender equality; in their opinion it is clearly a female matter. Despite the fact that the girls distance themselves from feminism, they are more aware of the gender struggle going on in society, as

they realize that to make ‘radical’ changes there needs to be struggle. Clearly though, these fifteen years old girls are likely to be entering future partnerships bringing with them the burden of housework. In contrast the boys are laid back, aware of their privileged position, knowing at worst that they will need to negotiate housework with a ‘responsible’ other half.

In concluding how the boys situate themselves within structures of power I find Bourdieu’s notion of the *habitus* as a ‘gendered habitus’ useful. He describes these logics of practises as the following:

The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, system of durable, transposable dispositions. Structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to obtain them. Objectively “regulated” and “regular” without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor (2007[1990]:278).

The overarching confidence of belonging to the ‘dominant’ team can be argued to be part of gendered consciousness, the habitus, and in the case of the boys, a product of a long history of masculine domination. The habitus as a historical product “ensures the active presence of past experiences, which deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms” (Bourdieu, 2007[1990]:279). Despite progressive laws, and strong positive discourses, changes are not going to occur within Icelandic society unless this ‘chain of gendered habitus’ is broken. It is alarming that boys at such a young age are so thoroughly integrated into the confidence that they are, and should be, superior to the other sex.

At the same time that the boys lean back with the confidence of belonging to the dominant masculinity, the girls have a more difficult time figuring out their status in the world’s power

structures. As they compete to become viable, they employ neo-liberal discourses of individualism and personal choice by distancing themselves from feminism. Instead they accept the offer to identify with discourses which offer individual 'autonomy' and where personal qualifications weigh more than being a woman. One example of acceptance of neo-liberal discourses is that the girls talked frequently about the subjective reasons behind choices and skills rather than drawing on discourses of gender differences. Therefore, I argue that the '*girls' habitus*' involves more explicitly the acknowledgement of contradictions than the '*boys' habitus*'.

As neo-liberal subjects, the girls face a difficult dilemma. At the same time as they accept the structure of power as a product of personal choices, they are likely to hit a glass-ceiling. The glass-ceiling is a reality for women, and by agreeing with neo-liberal discourses and rejecting feminism, they are accepting that women's absence from power can be explained by the fewer qualifications women have compared to men. Instead of embracing the 'freedom' of female agency in neo-liberal society, they are likely to become (increasingly) captured by masculine domination. What makes it even more difficult for the girls to obtain footing in contemporary Iceland is the prevailing discourse that gender equality has been achieved. While girls get the message that they have it all and can become whatever they intend, they will likely observe doors difficult to open, as well as the fact that the prevailing discourses and the reality facing women in Iceland are certainly not consistent with one another.

Reflecting certain contradictions between discourses and statistics about gender equality, similar disjunctions were found during the discussion among the all-girls groups. At the same time as the girls disapprove of feminists, judging them as being too extreme and having lost sight of what to strive for, the girls realize that their position is 'weaker'. Despite doing better in school on average than boys, they are aware of the inequality of gender relations. Following postfeminist

cultural influences, they hold onto the promises of a generational difference which will supposedly bring them a better future. The female participants acknowledge that changes within social structures do not happen automatically, and without doubt they want change. They want to be able to live up to the discourses promising “all that you want to have”.

6.2 Biting reality offering new opportunities

As subjects are produced within discourses, discourses also produce knowledge that shapes ideas about the everyday world (Foucault, 1983). The students’ perceptions of the world are shaped by multileveled discursive formations in contemporary Iceland. These discourses have been heavily influenced by the political terrain, led by the Conservative party until very recently, and characterized by liberal ideas towards gender equality. Women and men shall compete on the open market, which is supposedly ‘gender blind’ and focuses on individual skills instead of gender. Through public discourses the adolescents receive the message that gender equality has as good as been achieved, and what little remains is (supposedly) a matter of personal choice. The participants in the focus group discussions clearly echo these discourses which have been heard in Iceland for the last several years. Despite claims of an egalitarian society, the result has been ‘boys’ domination’ and ‘girls contradictions’.

As a feminist I am hopeful that the structure of the society can be overthrown, although the attitudes revealed by the participants in this study, on the surface, are not very promising for steps towards a more gender equal society. The sample in this study is very small and regional, and the participants’ attitudes cannot be perceived as a representative sample of the population of Icelandic 10th graders. However, since recent research has revealed more traditional attitudes towards the gendered division of housework in the present than among the same cohort fourteen years earlier, as well as a current circulation of more negative attitudes towards gender equality

than among older generations (Hjalmsdottir, 2007, Hjalmsdottir & Bjarnason, 2008, Bjarnason & Hjalmsdottir, 2008), the participants' exchanges help us see how discourses and realities produce Icelandic adolescent subjects.

Signs of stagnation or even backlash towards feminism can be observed in this study. Repeatedly the boys made misogynist comments. Since the everyday lives of the youth are linked by the family and the school, arguments like the one from Adalsteinsdottir (2009) that the Icelandic school system has failed when it comes to gender equality teaching should be taken seriously. In order to change the 'gendered habitus' gender education is absolutely necessary within the elementary schools. At best, gender studies should also be a part of the National Preschool Curriculum. As the girls were indignant over parliamentarian Kolbrún Hallsdórsdóttir's critique of the tradition of dressing newborns in pink and blue clothes within the hospitals, her point might be *the* crucial one for progressive change. Issues on gender need to be kept in focus from the cradle onwards.

As the habitus tends to generate reasonable, commonsense behaviours, a "new" common sense and tradition must be invented. It should then be easier to teach children and young people to adapt to new habits than to teach adults. Legislation is necessary, although the strong legal frame around gender equality in Iceland has not proved to be enough for progressive change. It is difficult to let go of power, as the boys reflect. Optimistically, the girls have the spirit of 'fighting back', and they deserve a habitus less muddled with contradictions.

It is important for young women to reconnect to feminist politics in forming constantly shifting identities within a contradictory modern reality. The obvious task for the feminist movement, both in Iceland as well as globally, is to encourage and reactivate young women in the struggle for gender equality. The 'kreppa' might bring Iceland new opportunities, a chance to turn its gaze away from the 'financial Vikings' towards a more humanitarian society with a

renewed focus on gender equality issues from a critical feminist standpoint. The first step was taken in the newly finished elections. We now have more feminists in the Icelandic parliament than ever before. Hopefully the chance to utilize (feminist) female power to make positive and needed changes for future generations will be taken up by young people like those participating in this study.

In light of the prominent discourses which express the belief that gender equality has already been achieved in Icelandic society, this research has aimed to shed light on the attitudes towards the issue among Icelandic adolescents. This thesis supports recent research which has found young people to hold traditional views on gender equality and reveals that the students of Brekkuskóli 10th grade do not hold very progressive attitudes towards gender equality. The findings give a picture of cultural ideas among the future generation in Iceland. Since not much research has been conducted on attitudes towards gender equality among adolescents in Iceland the main goal of this study has been to document how the participants perceive their everyday reality in relation to gender equality issues and to contribute to our understanding of how adolescents in Iceland mirror the discourses of neo-liberalism, pop-culture and postfeminism.

The participants' attitudes outlined above emphasize the necessity for further research within the field. The first step could be further discourse analysis on gendered discourses among youth in Iceland. It is also important to explore how hegemonic ideas on gender are produced and maintained within the school system. I do not intend to underestimate the importance of the parents as role models and significant educators on the matter, but at the same time public institutions, as the school, are of great importance when it comes to structural changes such as these which affect attitudes on gender equality. There is a great need to solve the complicated puzzle of how feminist research can lead us in 'biting back' and direct our lives towards gender equality in Icelandic society.

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Appendix A

Question guide

The private sphere

- What tasks do you have within the household at our homes?
- If you think about your homes and the housework done there would you say that your parents share the domestic work?
 - How do they divide the housework?
 - Can you think about possible explanation why they haven't manage to divide the work equally?
- In your future household, would you wish for similar division of domestic labour as you see in your home?
 - Why/why not?
- If both partners work equal hours on the job market, do you find it reasonable that the partner who holds more "powerful" position on the job market does less housework?
- Do you find it reasonable that the partner that works less hours outside the home does more housework?
 - Why/why not?

The public arena

- Now, if you think about the small 'kiosk' you are running here in the school to collect money for your graduation trip next spring, who are the leaders in that "business" and how are they chosen?
- Do girls and boys have the same opportunity to be "in power" in that business?
- Do you think that your small business somehow reflects the Icelandic job market?
- Can you think of possible explanation for women absence from position of power?
- In recent years, discussions on the gender pay gap has been quite significant, what are your ideas on that?
- What are your views on feminism?
 - Where from do you have your information about feminist ideology; media, school, home etc.?
- Last summer the popular pop-band Baggalútur released a song which was highly debated. Feminists claim that the text was humiliating for women and even encouraging

men to take advantage of drunk women for sexual purposes. Many disagreed, claiming that it was an innocent joke. What are your views on this?

- Now when we have ongoing struggle in the society on gender equality issues, in your opinion how important is it that gender equality will be achieved?
 - Why/why not?

Appendix B

Parental consent [Translated from Icelandic]

Dear parent/legal guardian,

I am currently working on my MA thesis in Sociology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. In my MA thesis, I plan to explore adolescents' attitudes towards gender equality by conducting focus group discussions among 10th graders at Brekkuskóli, Akureyri. Along with approximately 30 other 10th grade students at Brekkuskóli, your child has volunteered to participate in a focus group of 5 students to discuss general issues of gender equality. The focus group discussion will take place within your child's school and will take approximately an hour. The idea is to have the teenagers to discuss openly their own ideas on gender equality in Iceland. The focus group is not part of a course, but rather an opportunity to allow teenagers to voice their opinions and attitudes towards gender equality in general, including what they think about the current situation and how they would like to see our society develop in the future.

All of the focus group interviews will be recorded, but all the data collected will be strictly confidential and only accessible to me and my supervisor, Dr. Thomas Kemple. Any information that I use in my MA thesis will be anonymous, and all quotes made will be given under pseudonyms. Your child's teachers at Brekkuskóli are not part of the research team, and I assure you that a denial of permission for your child to participate will not have any negative consequences for your child at school. All students will be informed about the voluntariness of the study to ensure that they are aware that they can withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

If you consent to your child's participation in the focus group, please sign the next page of this letter and have your child bring it to her/his teacher before the 1st of November 2008. For further information on the research, please contact me via email at andrea@kanada.is or on my mobile at 821-1370. For more detailed information on the University of British Columbia research regulations and arrangements, you can also contact the *Behaviour Research Ethics Board* through email at breb.rise@ors.ubc.ca, phone +1-604-827-5112 or fax +1-604-822-5093. Thank you for your consideration.

Yours respectfully,

Andrea Hjálmsdóttir
MA student in Sociology,
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

I hereby consent that my child, _____, is allowed to participate in a focus group discussion on issues of gender equality conducted by Andrea Hjálmsdóttir in November 2008 and to have the focus group recorded.

Parent/guardian signature

Date

Appendix C

Participant's Letter of Assent [Translated from Icelandic]

I, the undersigned, have volunteered to participate in a focus group discussion on general issues of gender equality conducted by Andrea Hjálmsdóttir, an MA student in Sociology at the University of British Columbia, in November 2008. The focus group discussion will take place in Brekkuskóli and will take approximately an hour. The purpose of the study is to have teenagers participate in open discussions on attitudes towards gender equality in Iceland. The discussion will include our perspectives on the current situation and how we would like to see our society develop in the future.

I understand that the focus group is not part of a course and that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions asked during the focus group discussions. I am aware of the fact that my teacher is not part of the research team and that the participation in the focus group discussion has nothing to do with my general performance at school. I am also aware that the group discussion will be recorded and that the data collected will be kept in a locked cabinet that is only accessible to the researcher and her supervisor, Dr. Thomas Kemple. I have been informed that my participation in the study is voluntary, and I know that I can withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

I hereby consent that I am willing to participate in a focus group discussion on issues of gender equality conducted by Andrea Hjálmsdóttir in November 2008 and to have the focus group discussion recorded.

Participant signature

Date

Appendix D

Certificate of Approval – Minimal risk



The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services
Behavioural Research Ethics Board
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road,
Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - MINIMAL RISK

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Thomas M. Kemple	INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT: UBC/Arts/Sociology	UBC BREB NUMBER: H08-02173
INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:		
Institution	Site	
N/A	N/A	
Other locations where the research will be conducted: Brekhuskóli Primary School, Iceland		
CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): N/A		
SPONSORING AGENCIES: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)		
PROJECT TITLE: Is there a light out there? Adolescents attitudes towards gender equality in Iceland.		

CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE: November 17, 2009

DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:	DATE APPROVED: November 17, 2008	
Document Name	Version	Date
Protocol: Adolescents attitudes towards gender equality in Iceland	N/A	October 13, 2008
Consent Forms: Parental/legal guardian consent form	N/A	November 7, 2008
Participant assent form	N/A	November 7, 2008
Questionnaire, Questionnaire Cover Letter, Tests: Question guide	N/A	October 13, 2008
The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.		
<p align="center">Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board and signed electronically by one of the following:</p> <hr/> <p align="center"> Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair Dr. Ken Craig, Chair Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair Dr. Daniel Salhani, Associate Chair Dr. Anita Ho, Associate Chair </p>		