Perceptions of Gender-Balanced Governance in Iceland: Insights on Health, Welfare, Equity and Gender Mainstreaming Policies and Outcomes

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Abstract

This case study examines the link between women's political representation in Iceland and public perceptions of governance outcomes across various demographic groups. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach that includes quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and secondary data analysis. The research investigates how gender-balanced governance affects social welfare, health, equity, and the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming policies through critical mass and critical actors theory. Findings indicate that an increase in female leadership is associated with the implementation of progressive policies, such as enhanced childcare support, extended parental leave, improved access to education, LGBTQ+ rights advocacy, and significant healthcare reforms. Key initiatives in government and local institutions have prioritized gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting, as the 2016 Public Finances Act, which facilitated meaningful changes in Reykjavik and the University of Iceland. These initiatives also played a vital role in protecting women's "care" jobs during the COVID-19 crisis. While younger and older generations acknowledge these advancements, skepticism is more pronounced among individuals aged 30 to 55. This group tends to view the impact of female leadership less favorably, reflecting a disconnect between gender equity narratives and their daily challenges. Concerns about the quality of care for older adults and the support for racial and ethnic minorities emerge as critical improvement areas. The study highlights that, despite significant progress toward gender equality, persistent barriers like wage disparities and underrepresentation in business leadership remain. It endorses a bidirectional relationship between women's leadership and social change, suggesting that increased female representation could drive advancements in health, welfare, and equity policies. It also underlines the role of critical actor's leadership such as women's advocacy groups and female governmental leaders. Future research should aim for a more representative sample to assess perceptions of policy outcomes beyond Reykjavik.

Keywords: women's political empowerment, Iceland, perceived benefits, Nordic equality, legislative versus structural changes

INTRODUCTION

Little is known about whether perceived societal benefits keep pace with Iceland's rapid advance in descriptive representation. With the world facing catastrophic climatic events,

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pandemic threats, risks of nuclear wars, and wealth inequality, it is crucial to investigate good governance and the effects of balanced gender representation.

While progress has been made since the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, which recommended measures to ensure women's equal access and representation in decision-making, it has been lagging. The Gender Gap Index, introduced by the World Economic Forum in 2006, indicates that political empowerment has not yet reached a satisfactory level, with a global average of under 25% (World Gender Gap Report, 2024). While descriptive representation is crucial, it does not always translate to substantive representation, as women may hold parliamentary seats without significant influence in decision-making roles (Childs & Krook, 2009). The extent of the impact of women in leadership will depend on the number of women in Parliament who are motivated beyond party lines to represent various issues (Karam & Lovenduski, 2010).

Despite extensive research on the mechanisms that hinder gender-balanced leadership, studies on the impact of such representation are limited (Karam & Lovenduski, 2005). A growing number of studies conducted at the local and regional levels on gender differences in policymaking rely on (quasi-)random variation in the number of female representatives; however, the coverage is not global. Evidence is limited to the US, a handful of European countries (Germany, Italy, Norway and Spain), and India (Hessami & Lopes da Fonseca, 2020). Additionally, while much research exists on women representation, little is known about how citizens perceive the outcomes of this shift in governance.

Context

Nordic countries, recognised for their commitment to gender equality, including Iceland, have engaged in gender-related nation-branding to promote this image globally. Iceland has notably improved its political empowerment, consistently ranking at the top of the Global Gender Gap Index, with the representation of women in Parliament rising from 25% in 1975 to 47.6% in 2023 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). The Varieties of Democracy Index also reflects this progress, with Iceland's score improving from 0.85 to 0.93 between 1985 and 2022, and the Political Participation Index reaching a maximum of 1.0 in 2009, which has been maintained since (World Bank, 2024).

Vigdís Finnbogadóttir was the world's first democratically elected female president and one of the most inspirational Icelandic women, serving as president of Iceland from 1980 to 1996. During those 16 years, she advocated for women's rights, girls' education, and language diversity. Around the same time, a strong advocacy group that evolved into a political party, the Women's List, advocated for women's rights and played a key role in the introduction of childcare reforms. In 2009, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir became the first woman in Icelandic history to serve as Prime Minister, and at the time, her cabinet had an equal number of women and men. Since then, Iceland has had two more prime ministers and one president. The current government, elected in 2024, has women holding the positions of prime minister and minister of foreign affairs, in addition to a cabinet with more than half of its ministers being women, including all leaders of the government coalition parties. The president, who holds a largely symbolic, non-executive role, is also a woman.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The representation of women in key roles is crucial for addressing women's needs and harnessing their contributions to society. The literature underscores the multifaceted impacts of female representation in leadership across sectors such as health, economic growth, climate action, and peacebuilding.

Studies highlight the positive influence of women in leadership on societal views regarding gender equity and policymaking outcomes (Powell, 2013; Helliwell et al., 2021). Women in political leadership are active in recruiting other women and creating legislation that benefits all genders (Dahlerup et al., 2005). Their presence enhances the representation of women's voices in policymaking, which contributes to a broader political understanding, while, if women are primarily represented by men, they often feel less represented (Wolak, 2020; Carroll, 1994).

Women have been found to be more effective in addressing critical issues, such as healthcare, poverty, and education, ultimately leading to improved public health outcomes. Research indicates that women's cabinet representation can lead to increased public health spending and improved life expectancies (Mavisakalyan, 2014). Additionally, Helliwell et al. (2021) noted that countries with higher levels of women's representation also experience lower income inequality and greater institutional trust, which in turn contributed to lower COVID-19 death rates.

Benefits to the economic landscape have been associated with female representation. Constituencies that elect women demonstrate superior GDP growth compared to those with male leadership (Baskaran et al., 2018). Iceland serves as a prime example, where parental leave reforms and public daycare access have bolstered women's career progress (Arnalds & Duvander, 2023). Research also indicates that women's involvement in Research and Development Teams is linked to breakthrough innovations (Díaz-Garcia, 2014).

The influence of women in leadership is particularly pronounced in climate policy. Female mayors in the Amazon biome have been shown to reduce by 23% the region's average annual greenhouse gas emissions (Berniell et al., 2025). Women's leadership is deemed vital for effectively addressing climate change (Miranda & Espinosa, 2022).

Gender-equal societies tend to foster peace and stability. Women's involvement in negotiations enhances the likelihood of peace agreements being reached and sustained (Paffenholz, 2015). Audette et al. (2019) note that such societies also promote greater happiness, longevity, and economic prosperity for everyone involved.

Iceland has become a known success story in gender equality. Nonetheless, Iceland still faces challenges that must be addressed to achieve true gender equality. Studies have shown persistent educational and employment segregation (Bericat & Sánchez Bermejo, 2016). The "aura of gender equality" suggests a common belief that equality has been achieved, despite evidence to the contrary (Pétursdottir, 2009). While gender quotas have successfully increased women's representation on corporate boards—from 4% in 2003 to nearly 50% in 2015 (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2016)—, obstacles such as the gender pay gap and underrepresentation in small companies remain critical issues. As Iceland demonstrates, reforms in policy and societal structures are essential, but they must be accompanied by ongoing efforts to dismantle deeply rooted inequalities and stereotypes.

This study employs the theoretical frameworks of critical mass and critical actors as outlined by Childs and Krook (2008). The critical mass theory suggests that a minimum level of female representation is essential for enacting change within political institutions. Conversely, the critical actors theory focuses on key individuals who can mobilise support and advocate for women's issues. This differentiation underscores the distinction between descriptive representation (the mere presence of women) and substantive representation (genuine stakeholding of decisional power and advocacy for women's interests). These frameworks facilitate a deeper examination of the interplay between numerical and substantive representation in Iceland, aiming to address the following research questions:

How do different demographic groups in Iceland perceive the impact of the increased presence of women in political leadership roles and governance?

What role do critical actors play in translating numerical representation into substantive influence on health/welfare, and gender mainstreaming in policies?

How do these perceptions align with or diverge from legislative changes or expert opinions?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This case study presents a preliminary analysis that contributes to the limited literature exploring the perceived benefits associated with increased women's presence in political leadership in Iceland. While much of the existing research emphasises factors that bolster women's political empowerment, this study shifts its focus to the societal benefits that may arise from such empowerment. Given the complexities involved in quantifying both perceived and actual benefits, a mixed-methods approach was employed, incorporating quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, secondary data, and a comprehensive review of relevant legislation and literature since 2006.

The quantitative component involved surveys designed in English to assess public perceptions of individuals over 18 regarding the health and equity benefits of closing the gender gap in political empowerment. This approach utilised a non-representative convenience sample. Though many individuals in Iceland are proficient in English, the exclusive use of this language may inadvertently exclude certain demographic groups, particularly elderly individuals or those residing in remote areas. The use of English only surveys may bias the results. To mitigate this limitation during in-person surveys, particularly with older respondents, the researcher provided clarifications for any ambiguous items and, in some cases, offered additional assistance with the translation of survey items by native speakers. Nonetheless, these limitations are acknowledged as influencing the study's results. The survey targeted a diverse segment of the general population, soliciting responses from individuals across all ages and genders, including those who identify as non-binary. Respondents were categorised into three age bands: under 30 years, between 30 and 55 years, and over 55 years. The author collected responses face-to-face through links or QR codes, distributed paper questionnaires during in-person invitations at public venues or political party offices—mainly

in Reykjavik and selected towns across Iceland—and via email outreach to city halls. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of their anonymity throughout the process, resulting in a total of 146 responses. Even if this sample size is modest and part of a preliminary study, it can provide enough data to reveal initial patterns and insights about how citizens perceive the outcomes of a more gender equitable political leadership, even without claiming broader representativeness or generalization.

The composition was predominantly female (64%), with a slight underrepresentation of individuals over 55 years (14%), paralleling Iceland's median age of 36.2 years (Worldometer, 2025). The educational backgrounds of participants were diverse, reflecting a balanced distribution among high school graduates (30%), bachelor's degree holders (35%), and those with graduate degrees (35%). The questionnaire comprised nine closed questions that inquired about the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents and assessed the perceived benefits associated with closing the gender gap in political empowerment. Respondents rated statements using a Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 5 (very much), reflecting the extent to which various factors were perceived to be influenced by women's equal presence in political leadership. A Cronbach's Alpha test was conducted to assess the internal consistency or reliability of the survey questions, yielding a result of $\alpha = 0.723$. According to George & Mallery (2003), this value indicates an acceptable to good level of reliability for the items measuring the latent variable of perceived benefits in closing the gender gap in political leadership. Quantitative data were collected via SurveyMonkey, adhering to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) standards. An open-ended question was incorporated to gain deeper insights into the research query. Mean average analysis was utilised to assess societal aspects perceived as positively influenced by enhanced women's political leadership.

The qualitative aspect of the research involved semi-structured interviews designed to gather experiences and viewpoints from individuals directly involved in political empowerment or related research. This qualitative approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the social phenomena under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Six in-person interviews were conducted, each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, with a diverse group of experts, including four women and two men. The participants consisted of two parliamentarians from opposing parties, a senior government administrator, and three university professors specialising in Gender Studies and Political Science from the University of Iceland. Interviews occurred in Reykjavik in June 2024, with an additional online interview conducted in February 2025 to examine legislation enacted in 2018. A semi-structured format guided interviews to explore various themes associated with the research questions (Rabionet, 2009; Evans & Lewis, 2018). Discussion points included how gender-balanced governance may influence social welfare, health, and equity, as well as pertinent legislation passed in this regard. All interviews were conducted in English, a language with which all participants were proficient. Informed consent was obtained through written forms, ensuring ethical compliance and transparency throughout the study. Pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity. This case study presents a preliminary analysis examining the perceived benefits of increased women's representation in political leadership, with a commitment to seek appropriate ethics approval for future broader initiatives. It presently qualifies for an ethics review exemption for several reasons: (1) It aims to gather initial insights rather than testing a hypothesis. (2) A mixed-

methods approach was used, ensuring informed consent and anonymity. (3) It involved secondary data from public sources, avoiding sensitive issues. (4) Ethical considerations are noted, supporting the exemption, with plans for future ethics approval. (5) Qualitative data included open-ended responses on the impact of women's leadership on wellbeing.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded for thematic analysis, relating to the perceived benefits of closing the gender gap in political empowerment. The qualitative data collected included responses to open-ended questions related to identifying parameters for defining new categories based on participants' perspectives, if new themes arose, and categories relevant to the research question and directly related to survey questions investigating the possible perceived benefits associated with closing the gender gap in political empowerment, as indicated in the table below.

Table 1. ***Codebook Themes***

Topic	**Description**
Childcare support	Availability and accessibility of childcare services and support for families.
Parental Leave	Policies regarding maternity, paternity, and shared parental leave.
Human Capital	The impact of investing in women's education and professional development.
Women's Movement	The evolution and impact of the feminist movement on political empowerment.
Women's Lists	The Impact of Women's Lists in Elections on Representation and Results.
Barriers	Challenges and Obstacles Faced by Women in Achieving Political Empowerment.
Equal Rights	Legislative and social frameworks supporting equal rights for all genders.
Older Adults	The impact of political decisions on the welfare of elderly individuals.
Impact of Gender Equality on the Icelandic Economy	How gender equality initiatives contribute to the broader economy.
LGBTQ+	Inclusion and representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in political discussions.
Minorities	Inclusion and representation of minorities in political discussions.
Gender Mainstreaming	A policy-making approach that incorporates both women's and men's interests to address gender inequalities and promote gender equality at all levels.

The secondary data included the Infant Mortality Index and the Gini coefficient to assess the societal benefits associated with female political empowerment. The Infant Mortality Index, as

reported by the United Nations, is a measure of healthcare access and support for women and children. Additionally, the Gini coefficient serves as a measure of income inequality. Relevant laws and articles were examined to identify potential advantages of gender-balanced leadership in politics.

RESULTS

A. Health/Welfare

The table below presents the mean scores of survey respondents categorised by demographic characteristics (scale 0 to 5, with scores above 3 indicating essential or frequently mentioned factors) regarding perceptions of elements contributing to the overall health of the Icelandic population.

Table 2. ***Preliminary Data of Iceland survey Factors of Well-Being perceived as influenced by a more gender balanced Political Empowerment***

	Better Healthcare	**Access to childcare**	**Older adults' quality of care**
Female	3.6	4.0	3.2
Male	3.5	3.9	2.8
Non Binary	3.0	4.3	2.8
>30 years old	3.7	4.1	3.0
30-55 years old	3.3	3.7	2.9
>55 years old	3.6	4.3	3.4
High School	3.5	3.8	2.9
Bachelors degree	3.6	4.0	3.4
Graduate Degree	3.5	4.1	2.8
Overall Average	3.6	4.0	3.0

The survey reveals that access to childcare is perceived as positively influenced by the presence of women in political leadership across all demographics. Other factors, such as improved healthcare and the quality of care for older adults, were noted to a lesser degree. Notably, all demographics responded more positively to “better healthcare" than non-binary respondents.

Responses about older adults’ care varied widely, with males, non-binary individuals, and the 30-55 age group notably less positive about elder care compared to the other groups.

In contrast, respondents over 55, who benefit from these services, rated the quality of elderly care more positively.

Equity/Gender Mainstreaming

The table below displays the mean average scores of survey respondents regarding their perceptions of Equal Access to Work and Wages, Policies benefiting LGBTQ+ individuals, and Policies for racial and ethnic minorities. Scores are on a scale of 0 to 5, with scores above 3 indicating importance or frequent mention.

Table 3. ***Preliminary Data from Iceland Survey on Well-Being Factors Perceived as Influenced by Gender-Balanced Political Empowerment***

	Equal Access to Work and Wages	**Policies to Benefit the LGBTQ+ Community**	**Policies to benefit racial and ethnic minorities**
Female	3.7	3.7	3.3
Male	3.1	3.1	2.9
Non Binary	3.8	3.5	2.8
>30 years old	3.7	3.5	3.0
30-55 years old	3.2	3.4	2.8
>55 years old	3.7	3.6	3.7
High School	3.3	3.3	2.8
Bachelor's degree	3.7	3.6	3.3
Graduate Degree	3.5	3.6	3.2
Overall Average	3.5	3.5	3.1

According to the findings, the following factors were frequently perceived as positively influenced by an increased presence of women in political leadership positions: access to work and wages, as well as policies that benefit LGBTQ+ individuals.

DISCUSSION

This research examines the connection between numerical and substantive representation in Iceland, with a specific focus on demographic perceptions of how increased female political leadership affects governance outcomes in health, welfare, and equity policies. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, secondary data, and a review of relevant legislation and literature since 2006. Limitations include the use of a convenience sample, which may introduce biases (Etikan et al., 2016), potential language bias affecting older demographics, and a small sample size that restricts statistical analysis. The underrepresentation of groups such as individuals over 55 and males may further constrain the study's conclusions.

Health/Welfare

The results indicate that access to childcare is frequently perceived as improved due to women's leadership across demographics, while other areas, such as healthcare and the quality of care for older adults, received less emphasis.

The interview findings corroborated the emphasis on improved healthcare. Anonymous 4 highlighted a clear connection between women's leadership and welfare improvements: "Increased attention to welfare. We just passed a bill that increases payment for disability benefits and extends habilitation and sick leave", suggesting that women's numerical representation correlates with substantive policy changes, reflecting a greater commitment to social welfare.

Iceland boasts a low United Nations infant mortality rate of 1.1959 per 1,000 live births (UNdata, 2025), illustrating effective governance linked to economic prosperity and a robust healthcare system, both of which align with the welfare focus of enhanced women's political empowerment and the results of the study conducted by Bhalotra and Clots-Figueras (2014), which showed that female politicians are more likely to invest in public health infrastructure, including prenatal and childhood health services, leading to a significant reduction in infant mortality.

The management of the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the effectiveness of these policies, as Iceland reported fewer than seven deaths per 100,000 people, compared to higher rates in the United States and the United Kingdom (Scudellari, 2020).

Perceptions of elder care varied widely. While men, non-binary individuals, and those aged 30-55 rated care quality below 3.0, respondents aged 55 and above rated it positively at 3.5. These discrepancies underscore the impact of diverse demographic experiences on perceptions of governance and health policies, emphasising the importance of inclusive representation in decision-making roles. The 30-55 age group is also most likely the group that has the most working adults, who have to deal with day-to-day challenges due to economic pressures, caretaking responsibility for the care of both children and elderly, or systemic gendered labor expectations and inequalities, and therefore may hold a more realistic view of the achievements and limits of female political leadership.

The strengthening of Iceland's pension system, driven by advocacy from women's groups, further illustrates this point. Anonymous 5 noted: "The Woman's List pushed for social

improvements for the elderly". The alignment between the presence of women in leadership roles and the pressure from women's advocacy groups, as well as substantial legislative improvements, underscores the framework of descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation, first introduced by Pitkin's in 1967, distinguishing between descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation. These dimensions can represent gender equality in the following way: descriptive representation can be intended as inclusive policy processes, substantive representation can be the act of looking at policy content, and symbolic representation can be analyzed through the process of achieving gender equality through the advocacy of political actors. As seen in Iceland, a good balance between descriptive and substantive representation, represented by female political representatives that are not only present in large numbers but also occupy positions that hold influence in decision making, when intersected with critical actors—in this case, the Women's Lists—, can lead to tangible changes in policies benefiting marginalised populations.

The third factor, "access to childcare", had scores between 3.7 and 4.1 across demographics. The evolution of child care and parental leave policies underscores the role of critical actors in transforming policy. Anonymous 2 pointed to the Women's Lists as instrumental in establishing public, affordable daycare. Additionally, the ongoing improvement of parental leave, which now offers longer and better-compensated options, illustrates how critical voices can convert numerical representation into substantive influence.

The initial resistance to paternity leave in 2001 reflects the cultural challenges faced in promoting shared parental responsibilities, as described by Anonymous 3: "When I took two months of paternity leave, everybody went crazy among the directors." This resistance highlights differing perceptions among demographics, particularly men, compared to legislative changes promoting equity.

In 2021, revisions to parental leave were implemented to enhance economic incentives for men. Anonymous four noted, "In 2021, we extended the leave from 10 to 12 months," demonstrating ongoing efforts to adapt policies based on diverse experiences and perceptions.

In fact, fathers in Iceland have been increasingly embracing their paid parental leave, with approximately 90 per cent of all fathers taking advantage of their non-transferable rights to paid parental leave (Arnalds et al., 2022). Anonymous 4 emphasised that improved parental leave supports gender equality, encourages fathers to take leave and reduces the burden on mothers. This change aims to balance parenting responsibilities and strengthen women's status in the workforce.

On the other hand, in reality, men continue to take less time for paternity leave and taking care of the children after that period, as parenthood continues to be primarily associated with motherhood. There is a push toward intensive mothering, based on the construct that women possess an innate character that leads them toward a role as primary nurturers (Simonardóttir, 2016). Additionally, the perception of children as a social capital that society should invest in has disproportionately rested upon the services of women, who are often from racially and economically challenged groups (Vandenbeld, 2014).

Anonymous 2 reported, "When women became more numerous in the Parliament and local governments, they also affected men. Women's participation in leadership positions has

led to a more inclusive approach to policy-making, ensuring that diverse perspectives are considered in addressing societal issues."

Overall, the findings suggest that the increased presence of women in governance has had a positive influence on policies related to childcare, healthcare, and elder care. Respondents reported improvements in affordable childcare and parental leave, encouraging equitable family responsibilities. This correlation between women in politics and supportive family policies suggests a shift toward more effective governance, even though some perceived and substantive issues still need to be addressed, such as some concerns about elderly care and structural inequalities in the proportion of childcare responsibilities taken on by women, especially those belonging to racially and economically challenged groups.

Equity/Gender Mainstreaming

Iceland's success in social programs is often attributed to the Nordic model, which emphasises public responsibility for "citizen welfare within a market economy" (Kautto, 2010, p. 587). This model promotes gender equality and social policies, such as childcare and parental leave, enhancing women's employment opportunities. The Gini coefficient in Iceland has consistently ranged from 22 to 26 between 2006 and 2025, indicating low income inequality and suggesting that social assistance—encompassing financial aid, child benefits, housing assistance, unemployment benefits, and disability benefits—plays a significant role in reducing disparities. The stability of the Gini coefficient may reflect the Nordic value of equality rather than the specific influence of female leadership.

Perceptions of the benefits brought by women in political leadership roles in policies toward those identifying as non-binary were generally positive among most demographic groups; however, men's perceptions scored closer to neutrality, at around 3.0. Reykjavik has extended the concept of equality to encompass LGBTQ+ individuals, immigrants, and people with disabilities, as exemplified by the adoption of the "City of Reykjavik's Human Rights Policy" in 2006 (Einarsdóttir & Thorvaldsdóttir, 2007). As noted by Anonymous 4, several members of parliament identify as LGBTQ+, and notable figures include the first openly gay prime minister in 2009 and the recent Minister of Social Affairs, both of whom have contributed to significant legislative advancements, including a recent law on gender autonomy that paved the way for the inclusive Gender Equality Law—underscoring, again, the role of critical actors. Gender mainstreaming, which entails considering gender in all aspects of policy and decision-making, is a vital component of this progression. The finding that women officeholders are often viewed as more compassionate and better equipped to engage with constituents than their male counterparts aligns with the increased representation of women in office (Dolan, 2014).

Iceland's immigrant population reached 18.2% in 2024, with Poles as the largest group, according to Statistics Iceland (2024). The Suðurnes region recorded the highest immigrant density at 31.5%. To combat discrimination, the Icelandic government enacted Act No. 85 on Equal Treatment irrespective of Race and Ethnic Origin on June 25, 2018, and the Act on Equal Treatment in the Labour Market, No. 86/2018, prohibits discrimination based on various factors. Reykjavik's city council has also developed policies in alignment with national and international human rights standards to bolster equality initiatives.

However, perceptions regarding policies brought about by a gender-balanced political leadership benefiting racial and ethnic minorities varied; several demographics, including males and individuals aged 30-55, reported scepticism, scoring below 3.0 concerning the effectiveness of such policies. Regarding minority representation, Anonymous 5 noted the low presence of immigrants in Parliament, observing that fewer than 8% of representatives belong to this group. Anonymous 4 called for improvement in the representation of various ethnic backgrounds, citing the underrepresentation of these groups in positions of power. Additionally, strong female union leaders advocating for wage increases, particularly among low-paid sectors that often employ immigrant women, highlight efforts and, at the same time, an unmet need to address these disparities. Nordic countries, including Iceland, exhibit significant employment rate gaps between native and foreign-born women, reaching up to 15 percentage points (OECD/European Union, 2019).

On the other hand, survey respondents reported the emergence of new female leaders both in the political sphere and in the Unions, such as Sanna Magdalena Mörtudóttir and Sólveig Anna Jónsdóttir, who add awareness of the multiple obstacles that most women face in their journey, as well as elements of increased representation of diversity, richness, and connections with the population that are not found in other political leaders, thus echoing the transformational change in the feminist movement given by the framework of intersectionality (Zakaria, 2022).

Anonymous 4 drew attention to the limited presence of individuals with disabilities in power, but acknowledged the growing influence of critical actors, such as disability activists, who are increasingly using social media. Legislative progress includes increased disability benefits and extended sick leave, reflecting a broader societal focus on welfare. However, concerns remain about the challenges faced by disadvantaged populations. Some survey respondents also expressed concerns about the need to uplift the most underprivileged populations, including single mothers in poverty and underpaid immigrants. These intersectional challenges might further complicate Iceland's image of gender equality. The implementation of policies that focus primarily on gender equality, while under-addressing race, disability or class, can bring limitations impacting the image and the actual achievement of full equality.

Perceptions regarding the influence of women's increasing presence in political leadership roles on access to work and wages reveal nuanced demographic perspectives on governance outcomes. Overall, respondents generally rated the positive influences on access to work and wages as 3.5 or above. However, certain demographic groups, including men aged 30-55 and high schoolers, provided scores between 3.0 and 3.5, suggesting a more cautious outlook on the effectiveness of current policies.

With ongoing legislative efforts, such as the Equal Pay Certification Act enacted since 2017, aimed at addressing the gender pay gap (reported at 9.3% unadjusted in 2023), the disparity between perception and reality remains apparent. Anonymous 6 mentioned Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdóttir's commitment to equality, yet protests, such as the 2023 women's strike, underscore that legislative changes have not fully translated into equitable outcomes.

Responses from survey participants reveal concerns about vulnerable populations, stressing that while improved representation is inspiring, it must also translate into broader

policy measures that support marginalised groups, including single mothers, immigrants, and refugees. This highlights the role of critical actors: while women in leadership positions can advocate for inclusive policies, accurate substantive representation requires systemic changes that ensure equitable outcomes for all demographic groups.

Anonymous 3 describes equal access to jobs and emphasises the positive effects on the economy of a diverse decision-making body: "Gender equality has positively influenced Iceland's economy by ensuring that the entire working population, including women, contributes equally. A well-educated population has supported the transition from a fishing-dependent economy to a diversified one, into tourism, green energy, and technology."

Some contradictions about equal access to jobs are illustrated by Anonymous 2: "A general problem in the Nordic countries is that women are getting more educated than men, but the payoff is not the same. They get their way into good jobs and good salaries without the same education." As noted by Anonymous 2, a contradiction arises: despite women becoming more educated than men, they are not receiving proportional returns on their educational investments, reflecting systemic barriers, which is why women continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles, suggesting that mere numerical representation does not guarantee substantive influence, particularly in pushing for health and welfare policies.

This is in line with past research findings indicating that women get a lower "return" than men from their investment in education (Dow, 2009). "In terms of women on boards, companies, women as CEOs, we have a lot to do", as Anonymous 3 underlined: "In business, we are not there yet, for example, in the stock exchange, the companies that are there have very few women who are directors or CEOs of the company. At the top level of the biggest companies, there are 20-30% women. That is not good," and adds, "It is going to change inevitably", and points out another reason for the disparity: "Probably the men's salaries are a little higher as they work more hours, so probably the women work more at home".

Prime Minister Katrin Jacobsdóttir emphasised the economic risk of not addressing women's salaries. Since 2017, it has been illegal to pay women less than men for the same job in Iceland, with the Act on Equal Rights of Women and Men (Act No. 10/2008) amended to enforce the Gender Pay Standard for companies with 25 or more employees. Notably, the unadjusted gender pay gap was 9.3% in 2023 actually trending upwards and increasing from the previous year, which was reported as 8.6% (Statistics Iceland, 2023), with a notable larger gap among older employees.

The gender-segregated labour market in Iceland, where 43% of women work in the public sector compared to 15% of men (Callan, 2021), raises questions about the assertion by Mandel & Semyonov (2006) that Iceland is moving away from such segregation. In 2023, the gender pay gap in the private sector stood at 13.9%, signalling ongoing disparities. Despite women attaining more university degrees than men, men often secure higher wages in overrepresented sectors, such as nursing and teaching, partly due to working more overtime and holding positions with better benefits. Findings from Anonymous 4 reveal that men with less education can still earn more, particularly in industries dominated by women, such as nursing and teaching, supporting the findings of Dow (2009). Furthermore, only two out of 25 CEO positions in the trade market are held by women (Anonymous 1), emphasising the need for critical actors to address this imbalance.

Recent legislative measures, such as the Gender Equality Law, aim to promote gender mainstreaming, ensuring that government policies and budgets consider gender implications (Anonymous 2). This framework seeks to promote substantive representation, ensuring that women's contributions and needs are recognised in economic planning. Following the 2008 financial crisis, the Government Coalition Platform, led by the newly appointed female Minister of Finance, introduced the concept of gender budgeting, inspired by practices from Australia and New Zealand. It was enacted and became legally binding in Iceland in 2016 under the Public Finances Act. The city of Reykjavik and the University of Iceland followed suit, implementing their gender budgeting programmes, showcasing a commitment to ongoing evaluation and adaptation of policies affecting women's roles and welfare (Steinþórsdóttir & Guðmundsdóttir, 2018).

Gender budgeting policies were recommended during the COVID-19 crisis. To ensure gender equality in COVID-19 recovery funding, the European Parliament lobbied to make sure that half of the European Union's Resilience and Recovery Instrument was set aside for policies and measures to benefit women and advance gender equality in the COVID-19 response, calling for investment in the care economy, developing resilient childcare services and schools that allow all parents to maintain paid jobs and a healthy life balance (UN Women, 2021). As Anonymous 6 reports, during the COVID-19 crisis in Iceland, gender budgeting helped safeguard care jobs, while most government sectors faced budget cuts. The government implemented a 2% flat rate cut, except for the care economy, which includes the healthcare system and education. The new government coalition, led by women taking power in February 2025, has expressed continued intentions to re-evaluate women's traditionally held jobs and take active measures.

Analysing this through the lens of the critical actors framework reveals that while legislation exists to promote gender equality, systemic barriers persist. The reality that women are more educated yet receive less financial return highlights a contradiction in access and representation. Anonymous 3 noted that gender equality positively influences Iceland's economy by facilitating equal contributions from all workforce segments. However, the lack of women in top company positions indicates the need for continued advocacy for both descriptive (the presence of women) and substantive representation (actual impact on policies).

At the same time, as Anonymous 6 reports, "In Iceland, we have a huge gender income gap that is 21%, and it reflects the society we live in. It reflects the undervaluation of women's care-related jobs compared to male-dominated jobs in terms of salary income. Still, it also reflects that one third of the women are in part-time positions because of family responsibilities beyond paid care".

Survey respondents noted that increased female leadership has led to better access to education and more equitable policies. Although one survey respondent noted that while Iceland's reputation as a "paradise for women" has had a positive impact, it can also lead to complacency and overlook persistent issues, like poverty among single mothers and poorly paid immigrant jobs, underscoring that tangible support for marginalized groups is still needed.

From the lens of descriptive and substantive representation, the increased presence of women does not automatically lead to improved welfare and equity outcomes. Axelsdóttir and Einarsdóttir (2017, p. 17) pointed out that the childcare system "is equal on paper, but not in

practice", as mothers generally take the more extended parental leave and end up bridging the gap between parental leave and the beginning of preschool, which is in line with Símonardóttir (2021), who emphasises the general cultural belief in Iceland of mothers as primary nurturers.

Critical actors in Icelandic governance must bridge the gap between numerical representation and substantive influence to address longstanding inequalities, particularly in health and welfare policies. Although respondents recognise the positive impact of women's leadership, their perspectives often diverge from expert opinions and legislative changes, revealing a need for continued efforts to translate representation into meaningful outcomes for all demographic groups.

In summary, the perceptions of different demographic groups reflect a complex interplay between numerical representation and substantive influence, revealing gaps in translating increased female leadership into tangible policy improvements. While Iceland's government has implemented measures to combat the gender pay gap and promote equality, entrenched societal norms and labour market inequalities continue to pose significant challenges. The ongoing legislative efforts signal positive intent, but critical actors must work to address the underlying disparities to achieve genuine change.

CONCLUSIONS

This research elucidates the intricate relationship between women's political representation in Iceland and the varied perceptions of governance outcomes among differing demographic cohorts. Employing both descriptive and substantive representation frameworks, the findings reveal that although a higher presence of female leadership correlates with the advancement of social welfare policies, the reception of this influence is not uniform across age groups. Specifically, both younger and older respondents exhibit a greater alignment with the advantages associated with women's leadership, while individuals aged 30-55 demonstrate a more sceptical perspective, possibly due to economic pressures, caretaking responsibilities, gendered labor expectations and inequalities contributing to a more realistic view of the achievements and limits of female political leadership.

This scepticism suggests that narratives surrounding 'gender equity aura' and 'nation branding' may fail to resonate with those grappling with tangible structural challenges in their daily lives (Pétursdottir, 2009). Intersectional challenges might further complicate Iceland's image of gender equality. The implementation of policies that focus primarily on gender equality, while under-addressing or -representing race, disability or class can bring about limitations impacting the image and the actual achievement of full gender equality.

All respondents overall showed lower scores for older adults' quality of care and policies benefiting racial and ethnic minorities, indicating that there is additional work needed to address these areas that still need improvement.

The study supports Ford's (2010) concept of a bidirectional process wherein the rise of women in leadership positions fosters social change, simultaneously promoting a more gender-balanced leadership landscape and highlighting the resilience of socioeconomic policies that receive bipartisan support (Fjaestad et al., 2021). Both qualitative and quantitative data from interviewees and survey respondents underscore the significant positive impact of enhanced

social welfare initiatives on critical areas, including childcare support, parental leave, educational access, LGBTQ+ rights, and healthcare improvements. Governmental, local and institutional initiatives have aimed at applying gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting initiatives, culminating in the passing of the 2016 Public Finances Act, which was followed by the city of Reykjavik and the University of Iceland. These initiatives lead to significant impact in initiatives to protect and save heavily women's lead "care" jobs during the COVID-19 crisis.

Despite Iceland's progress towards a gender-balanced workforce, persistent barriers and discrimination continue to impede the full realisation of OECD gender budgeting recommendations (Bericat & Sánchez Bermejo, 2016). As articulated by Mustosmäki et al. (2021), the advancement of structural and cultural changes is not always synchronous. Additionally, increased female leadership should be paired with intersectional inclusion strategies to ensure equity for minorities. Continued pressure by critical actors like women's advocacy groups and engagement in cultural diplomacy may catalyse structural transformations towards achieving gender pay equity (Isar & Triandafyllidou, 2020).

Future policies should address structural wage gaps in both the public and the private sectors. As women advance into higher leadership roles, the potential for substantive enhancements in health, welfare, and equity policies appears increasingly promising. Future research endeavours should encompass a larger and more representative sample, incorporating surveys in both Icelandic and English languages, alongside an examination of the perceived outcomes of policies beyond the urban context of Reykjavik.

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