

State of the world's fathers: Time for action ^[1]

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Foreward

Nothing can prepare you for meeting your children for the first time: you are overwhelmed by a feeling of responsibility for their happiness and well-being, and you are determined to do your absolute best in this new role. The influence your parents have had on you, both good and bad, dawns on you: their successes, which should be replicated and their mistakes, which should be avoided.

When we in Iceland put in place a paternity leave policy in 2000, through which new fathers are allotted three non-transferable months of leave (alongside three non-transferable months offered to mothers, and a remaining three to split), it was nothing less than a broad-sweeping effort to address gender inequality in Iceland.

This policy, in many ways, served to level the playing field at work and at home: eliminating the penalty women often face at work when they take maternity leave, and getting men to shoulder the responsibility of child-rearing at home.

The effects have been massive. It has changed norms and behavior in a meaningful way, enabling and encouraging men to fully participate in their children's lives. We see the positive impact of this not only for newborns, but also as children grow older.

It has become increasingly clear that positive father-child relationships bring benefits for all involved: for women and children, and we also see that involved fatherhood makes men themselves happier and healthier.

By taking on a larger share of care work and domestic work, involved fathers are promoting gender equality through their actions. That is what State of the World's Fathers: Time for Action is all about: how to make gender equality a reality, through actionable, concrete steps.

The generations before us could not be seen pushing a stroller – it wasn't "manly" enough. Those same men were told not to cry, to "man up" and to be strong, but we cannot live our lives following some predefined version of masculinity.

These social norms, the ideas about what it means to be a man, affect boys and men throughout their lifetimes: men are less likely to see a doctor than women are; they are less likely to talk about their feelings, and more likely to commit suicide.

Some ideas of manhood are outright dangerous, leading men to use violence against other men, against women, and against children. Global estimates indicate that one in three women experiences physical or sexual violence in her lifetime, mostly perpetrated by men, and the majority of cases by an intimate partner.

These are some of the reasons that we, as the Government of Iceland, have developed the Barbershop concept: a series of events targeted at getting those individuals in decision-making and leadership positions to reflect personally on their power, privilege, and role in advancing gender equality. It's also why we are champions of HeforShe, UN Women's global campaign to create a bold, visible force for gender equality. And most importantly, it's why as a country, we have taken the gender equality agenda so seriously in policy and practice.

This is why research like you have in your hands today, State of the World's Fathers: Time for Action, is so important. It builds the evidence base for what we know to be true in Iceland and in many other countries around the world: that when fathers have the opportunity and the support to do so, they can contribute in a meaningful way to their children's lives and to a more gender-equal world.

Gudlaugur Thor Thordarsson
Minister for Foreign Affairs, Iceland

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