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THE POWER OF WOMEN: A CONVERSATION WITH THE HONORABLE VIGDIS FINNBÓGADÓTTIR

Interviewed by Riane Eisler, JD, PhD (hon)

Abstract

Riane Eisler interviews Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, president of Iceland from 1980 to 1996, at her home in Iceland, about equality and partnership. The nation of Iceland got its independence from the kingdom of Denmark in 1944; in its infancy as a democracy, Icelanders elected a single divorced mother as their head of state, which gained world attention. She was the world's first democratically elected woman president, and the longest-serving. Since then she has been a leader in Iceland and internationally, with the Council of Women World Leaders, UNESCO, The Club of Madrid, and The Vigdís International Centre for Multilingualism and Intercultural Understanding at the University of Iceland.

Keywords: Iceland; female heads of state; women; gender equity; education; Vigdís Finnbogadóttir

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Riane Eisler: You have been a pioneer as Iceland's and the world's first female president. What characteristics of the Icelandic culture do you think contributed to your being the world's first elected female president?

Vigdís Finnbogadóttir: Well, in Iceland, the women are very strong, because we are seafarers, and the seamen have great respect for women because they take care of

everything at home. In the last century, women in Iceland have become very well educated and, as we all know, education gives strength.

In 1975, five years before I was elected, women decided to stop working for one day to protest being paid less than men, not least in unspecialist work. It wasn't a strike, it was a day off. They went to their bosses and asked for the day off, to which their bosses very kindly agreed. Everyone in Iceland knew about it, as it was organized all over the country. The bosses knew about it and were very generous, and said, "Yes dear, if you want to meet your friends in the square, of course you can go." But what they didn't anticipate was that the workplaces around the country were paralyzed, because women worked in factories, and the factories stopped. In banks, the women who work there are usually on the first floor, and the men and bank directors are on the top floor, so everything came to a halt.

I was the director of the Reykjavík City Theatre at the time, and we were going to have a dress rehearsal that evening. There was a knock on my door, and outside the door were all the ladies in the theatre company. They asked, "Can we go?" When you have a dress rehearsal, nobody leaves, so I said to them, "You have to decide that yourselves, but I'm going." So we all marched to this magnificent meeting on the main square in Iceland. There were thousands of women who had stopped working.

Then, when it came to presidential elections in 1980, there were many in this country who said it would be impossible not to have a woman candidate among the presidential candidates, and to my great surprise, they came to me and asked me to stand for election. Being very much a woman, I of course said, "No, no, no, not me." However, people I trusted very well convinced me to stand, and I was elected. I served as president of the Republic of Iceland for 16 years, and everybody tells me now that those were good years, not bad years (Valsson, n.d.).

Eisler: On a more personal level, what led you to enter politics and take on a leadership role?

Finnbogadóttir: The president of Iceland is not politically elected. He or she is elected as a personality, and I think that I was elected because I was a person of culture, not because I was a woman. I have always been preoccupied with culture, the culture of Iceland as well as the various cultures of the world.

Eisler: You are highly respected for your commitment to the environment, yet that was not always a popular stance. What empowered you to be a transformative leader on environmental issues?

Finnbogadóttir: We live on an island here in the North Atlantic, and it's a windy place. The highlands are dry, and I had a feeling that the country was blowing out to the sea, so that gave me the idea that we have to bind the earth from blowing away. We have to use everything that grows to bind the country. So I started planting trees during my presidency, especially with children helping, and that became very popular: to plant three trees, one for the girls, another for the boys, and one in the middle for the unborn children. So that was the beginning of it. But I have always been very much for nature and for everything that grows. That is perhaps more likely for women to fight for than for men, but that is changing today, fortunately.

Eisler: You have been a tireless champion for the rights of women. What cultural benefits have you seen when women experience more equality?

Finnbogadóttir: Well, we have everything to gain when women participate. We all know that women are as intelligent as men. All fathers, all brothers know that their daughters and their sisters are as intelligent as the sons and brothers. And yes, why shouldn't we herald that? I don't know of any case where people have suffered from having a woman in a leadership role or women working in the labor force. It should be so natural all over the world, that men and women should work side by side to do whatever benefits society. It's a fact: The more women there are working at the

same aims as men, the better the world becomes, because women are against war, women are against strife, women are pacifists, and if we do not need that in this world, I do not know what we need.

Eisler: Worldwide, women perform most of the work of caring for people, starting in early childhood, for low wages in workplaces and for free in homes. What can be done to change the devaluation of this “women’s work,” and the consequences of that devaluation in poverty and hardships for women and children?

Finnbogadóttir: Well, it’s very difficult to fight cultural tradition, and the changes are very slow in this world, especially in the so-called developing world. But we are there to fight for equality between men and women and to be an eye-opener for men, to appreciate the intelligence and capacity of women leading in the society. Men are fathers, women are mothers; why don’t they work together for the future of children, for peace and a better world? I think we have to use every opportunity to open people’s eyes, especially men’s.

Eisler: The Center for Partnership Studies (CPS) developed new metrics, Social Wealth Economic Indicators (SWEIs; CPS, n.d.) showing the economic value of the “women’s work” of caring for people both in the short run (reducing poverty, etc.) and in the long run (producing the high-quality human capital needed in this age of the Knowledge Society), and we are now developing a Social Wealth Index (SWI). How can we bring these new economic measures to the attention of national policy makers to adopt as gender-sensitive alternatives to GDP?

Finnbogadóttir: Well, if I could answer that question, I would be world famous. There are so many answers, but my main answer is that men can be afraid of the strength of women. Men can be jealous of the strength of women. Men have, in so many countries, not accepted the intelligence of women. But fortunately, in many countries, men have realized that women’s brains are as good as men’s. Policy makers shouldn’t devalue the capacity of women, because they should look at their

own daughters, mothers, sisters, who share their intelligence. But the short answer to this question is education, education, education, information, information, information. That's the key answer.

Eisler: Violence against girls and women is a global pandemic with disastrous personal, social, and economic consequences. Yet the 17 July 1998 “Crimes against Humanity” section of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Eisler, 2013) has not yet been used to hold governments accountable for failing to enact and/or enforce laws against these systematic, egregious human rights violations, even though this has been proposed. How do you think such a proposal can gain support?

Finnbogadóttir: It's always the same answer. Information, education. Education, information. And the schools have great responsibility in this case, in my opinion.

Eisler: Tell us about your initiative in Iceland to foster intercultural understanding.

Finnbogadóttir: One of my most recent projects is the building and opening of Veröld - House of Vigdís, at the University of Iceland. It houses the Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Institute of Foreign Languages, The Vigdís International Centre for Multilingualism and Intercultural Understanding, and the University's Faculty of Languages and Cultures (Veröld - House of Vigdis, n.d.). The Center functions under the auspices of UNESCO. As a group of dedicated women, we were able to recruit stakeholders who believed in the concept. The center and its beautiful building are manifestations of the power of women when they join forces.

Eisler: What messages do you have for national and grassroots women leaders today?

Finnbogadóttir: Be yourselves. Be yourselves and never forget that by being there, if you have things to say that people listen to, then use this opportunity to herald

the equality of sexes: That women are as strong as men. Not physically, perhaps, but they are intellectually as strong as men. And may I add, men, intellectually, are as strong as women.

Eisler: What do you think are the most effective steps citizens can take to accelerate the movement to a more just and caring partnership economy and society?

Finnbogadóttir: By accepting and heralding that men are as intelligent as women and women are as intelligent as men. It's a long tradition of the centuries, that women should be inferior to men. But the minds of women are not inferior to men. They have the same genes, they have the same intelligence and the key to it all is education, education, education. Get educated, get educated, get educated. Look for information. Look for solid information, where you can search what's right and what's wrong, and it's definitely very wrong in the world to underestimate women's intelligence.

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President Vigdís Finnbogadóttir was the fourth [President of the Republic of Iceland](#), serving from 1980 to 1996. She was the first democratically directly elected female president, and the longest-serving female president in the world. She has initiated and taken part in numerous national and

international actions. She founded the [Council of Women World Leaders](#) together with Laura Liswood, a longtime Secretary General of that organization. President Vigdís is a [UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador](#) for languages, and a member of [The Club of Madrid](#) composed of 81 former Presidents and Prime Ministers. The biographer Páll Valsson describes the story of President Vigdís as the story of Iceland in the 20th century <https://www.islit.is/en/promotion-and-translations/icelandic-literature/icelandic-titles/nr/1174>. Iceland got its independence from the kingdom of Denmark in 1944, so in its infancy as a democracy Icelanders elected a single divorced mother as their head of state, which gained world attention. Since then President Vigdís has made deep marks, not only in Iceland but internationally, and she is still going strong. One of her recent projects is the opening of Veröld - House of Vigdís, which accommodates the University of Iceland's [Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Institute of Foreign Languages](#), [The Vigdís International Centre for Multilingualism and Intercultural Understanding](#) (<https://vigdis.hi.is/en/verold>) and the University's Faculty of Languages and Cultures. The Center functions under the auspices of UNESCO. The Center and its beautiful building are a manifestation of the importance of promoting studies of foreign languages, keys to the literary heritage of the world.

Riane Eisler, JD, PhD (hon), is president of the [Center for Partnership Studies \(CPS\)](#), Editor-in-Chief of the [Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies](#), and author of [The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future](#), *Sacred Pleasure*, *Tomorrow's Children*, *The Power of Partnership*, and [The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics](#). Her recent [Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future](#) (co-authored with Douglas Fry; Oxford University Press, 2019) combines her research with findings from the social and biological sciences, especially neuroscience. Eisler keynotes conferences worldwide and consults for governments on the partnership model. She authored over 500 articles for outlets including *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Human Rights Quarterly*, and *International Journal of Women's Studies*.

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The Honorable Vigdís Finnbogadóttir