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# *'They Say There's More Equality. . .'*: Women's Perspectives on Progress and Setbacks in Gender Equality in Northern Iceland During Times of Crisis

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**Abstract**

Enabling gender equality through the empowerment of women to fully participate in modern society is one of the most critical steps toward sustainable development. However, recent UN reports indicate that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have jeopardized the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 5 by 2030 in many countries worldwide, including Iceland, which has consistently been ranked as a global leader in gender equality. The main objective of this qualitative study is to examine the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by exploring women's lived experiences during the crisis and its aftermath across the primary domains of gender equality—personal and social. The study is based on 72 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in the Northeastern Region of Iceland (Norðurland eystra) in 2022–2023, utilizing both strength-based and deficit analyses. The findings from the study indicate that, despite high government gender equality standards and support programs, as well as the considerable resilience demonstrated by women during the pandemic crisis, women in Iceland continue to encounter significant constraints to empowerment in achieving genuine gender equality within the personal and social domains. The study outcomes suggest that the further integration of a gender-responsive approach into policy development is crucial for the implementation of more comprehensive, nuanced, and locally adaptive gender equality measures. Advancing such policies will not only strengthen Iceland's position as a global leader in gender equality but also contribute to its long-term social sustainability.

**Keywords:** women; gender empowerment; gender equality; 'super moms'; burnout; intensive parenting; Iceland; COVID-19 pandemic

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## 1. Introduction

### *1.1. Background*

Iceland is internationally recognized as a global leader in gender equality, having consistently ranked first in the Global Gender Gap Report for the past fifteen years. The 2024 report [1] underscores that Iceland has closed over 90% of its overall gender gap, as a result of substantial achievements across key domains of gender equality. Over the years, Iceland has gained an international reputation as a 'gender equality paradise,' with gender equality becoming a source of national pride and a central pillar of the country's positive international branding, distinguishing it on the global stage [2–5]. Iceland's recent

branding campaigns in the form of public diplomacy initiatives have centered on narratives of Icelandic exceptionalism by showcasing 'Sprakkar,' extraordinary Icelandic women, as symbols of the nation's global leadership in gender equality, thereby reinforcing Iceland's image as a gold standard in this domain [6].

On the path toward gender-progressive Nordic exceptionalism, Iceland's advancement in achieving high standards of gender equality has been shaped by persistent collective efforts of the global and broader Nordic regional feminist movements, ultimately becoming appropriated in the domestic agenda through local activism [7–9], driven in large part by Icelandic women themselves, with a turning point event Kvennafrídagurinn (The Women's Day Off) on 24 October 1975, when an estimated 90% of women across the country protested by not going to work and by doing no housework [9,10] (p. 257). Over the next few decades, Iceland strengthened institutional mechanisms for gender empowerment. The government mainstreamed gender equality into public policies, institutions, and practices at all levels and in all spheres [9–13].

While these efforts have been of critical importance, a growing body of the literature highlights the persistence of gender-based structural and systemic inequalities in Icelandic society that need to be addressed [4,7,14], while also questioning the criteria for the selection of gender equality indicators used in international rankings [10,15,16]. One of the pressing issues recently getting more academic and public attention is gender-based violence, often framed within the context of the so-called 'Nordic paradox' [17], where countries with the highest levels of gender equality also have high rates of violence against women. A recent study by Thordardottir et al. [18] found that approximately 40% of women in Iceland had experienced physical or sexual violence. This situation has even led to legal action against the Icelandic state on grounds of systemic misogyny [19]. The COVID-19 pandemic deepened many pre-existing gender inequalities [10,16], ultimately contributing to a nationwide "Women's Strike" on 24 October 2023, with more than 100,000 women, nearly 30% of Iceland's total population, participating in support of genuine gender equality, and specifically, the elimination of gender-based violence and the closure of the gender pay gap.

Enabling gender equality is achievable through empowerment defined as an ability of women to exercise agency at all levels and across all spheres of engagement, which represents one of the most important advances toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 and long-term social sustainability [20]. Empowerment is a multidimensional concept with a wide range of definitions, as its meaning and application are highly contextualized and vary significantly depending on the specific domain of life [10,21–30]. In this paper, women's empowerment is broadly understood as the capacity to make purposive choices and then to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes, exercise power and agency, the ability to have a critical consciousness of their rights and means to exercise them, and the process by which they are able to help themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives [27,28,31]. Despite the importance of gender empowerment in times of crises, there remains a significant gap in both public discourse and academic research regarding the trends that emerged or were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. All domains of gender empowerment—political, economic, civic, social, and personal—are equally important and all of them are supporting community sustainability and thrivability [10,20]; however, in the Icelandic context, women's empowerment in social and personal domains remains understudied. Although a growing volume of the literature has addressed the gendered impacts of the pandemic on women in Iceland [32–35], this is, to the best of our knowledge, the first study to comprehensively examine women's lived experiences of strengths of and constraints to gender empowerment during the pandemic

and the recovery period within the personal and social domains of gender equality in smaller, more remote northern communities of Iceland.

### 1.2. Goal and Research Questions

This paper aims to improve the understanding of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in the Northeastern Region of Iceland and identify strengths of and constraints to gender empowerment within the personal and social domains of gender equality during the COVID-19 crisis and the early stages of recovery. The primary research questions that the research team seeks to address in this paper are as follows:

What were the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in northern Iceland, and specifically what were the gendered implications within the personal and social domains of gender equality?

What were the strengths associated with women's empowerment during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and what were the constraints?

### 1.3. Conceptual Framework

While most COVID-19 pandemic-related studies often use deficit-based models with an emphasis on the problems and weaknesses of vulnerable groups, this research combines this approach with a strength-based perspective that is oriented toward women's empowerment by highlighting their unique skills, achievements, and potential. This choice is informed by the recognition that accounting for both strengths contributing to women's empowerment and constraints imposing limitations to such empowerment can lead to a more holistic understanding of the lived realities and inform the effective responses to crises like the COVID-19 pandemic in the future [36–38].

The study's conceptual framework (Figure 1) focuses on gendered aspects of strengths of and constraints to women's empowerment in Iceland, and incorporates two key domains of gender equality—personal and social—which encompass the multifaceted impacts and responses to the COVID-19 crisis, offering a comprehensive perspective through which to understand women's empowerment during the pandemic and the recovery period.

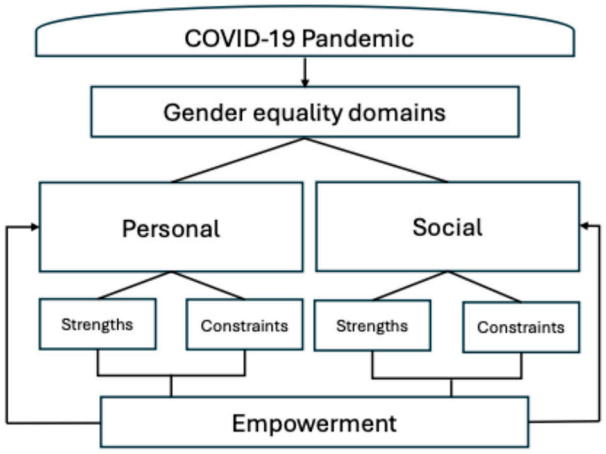



**Figure 1.** Strengths of and constraints to women's empowerment within the personal and social domains of gender equality during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. Source: Based on interview data and COVID-19 gender impact indicators (COVID-GIIs) [39].

In this study, women's empowerment in the personal domain of gender equality refers to an individual's capacity to make purposeful and autonomous choices in their personal lives and to translate those choices into meaningful actions, the ability to exercise agency, assert personal boundaries, critically reflect on one's rights and gendered power relations, and the process by which they are able to help themselves to achieve personal

growth, self-recognition, and self-worth, and ultimately enhance well-being and overall life satisfaction (based on [24,26,40]).

Women's empowerment in the social domain of gender equality is broadly defined as their capacity to make meaningful choices and transform them into actions that influence their social environment, the ability to exercise agency and collective power to reshape gendered social norms, build supportive networks, and foster intergender solidarity, and the process toward shaping equitable relationships within the household and beyond (based on [23,26,27]).

These domains are examined through the dual lens of constraints (a deficit-based approach) and strengths (a strength-based perspective), providing insights into women's lived experiences of empowerment during the pandemic and its aftermath.

## 2. Methods

This interview-based study was conducted in Iceland between August 2022 and September 2023, with follow-up feedback collected in October 2023 during preliminary results presentations for local communities in Akureyri and Húsavík.

### *2.1. Study Region*

The research is focused on women living in the Northeastern Region of Iceland, specifically in the city of Akureyri, the town of Húsavík, and neighboring rural communities. These rural locations are not disclosed due to small population sizes, which could potentially compromise participants' confidentiality. The Northeastern Region of Iceland presents a valuable case for gender studies, as it reflects key characteristics common to Arctic regions, including geographic remoteness, smaller and dispersed populations, and a much less diversified economy. These conditions are accompanied by pronounced gender divisions of labor, with women overrepresented in female-dominated lower-paid sectors such as childcare, social care, healthcare, education, social services, and hospitality and the tourism sector, in addition to less robust support services for victims of domestic violence and abuse. On the other hand, for decades, this region has been a stage for the Icelandic women empowerment movement [9,11]. In this context, these study sites serve as an important showcase for understanding gender dynamics in the northern communities in times of crises and for highlighting the importance of addressing the disparities across regions in Iceland.

The city of Akureyri, Iceland's second largest urban center after the capital Reykjavík, is characterized by a gender-balanced population of 19,542 people (49.7% of male and 50.2% female residents, and 0.06% non-binary/other) [41]. The public sector, hospital, and university play a pivotal role in shaping the city's economic and social profile. The town of Húsavík is a smaller settlement in the Northeastern Region with a population of 2449 of whom 47.3% are women, 52.7% are men, and 0% non-binary/other [41]. Despite Húsavík and several neighboring rural settlements becoming increasingly ethnically diverse, with immigrants comprising nearly 20% of the total population [41], the town maintains a high level of community cohesion with elements of a close-knit society. All our study communities exhibit a strong family-oriented community profile [42].

During the pandemic, Iceland did not undergo full lockdowns, as the government implemented varying levels of preventative restrictions instead, and most of the time schools stayed open [43,44]. In the Northeastern Region, limited social interactions within close circles of relatives and friends were allowed, which was particularly crucial for mothers with small children. Relatively mild or no restrictions on outdoor activities and access to nature played a significant role in supporting women's physical and mental health, as well as their psychological well-being. The slower pace of life and reduced pressure

to participate in social events and children's extracurricular activities created valuable opportunities for women to engage in personal and professional development.

### 2.2. Research Approach

This study draws on the elements of the grounded theory methodology [45,46], which enables a nuanced, in-depth exploration of women's lived experiences and the meanings they construct within their social environments. The study is designed to integrate diverse information streams from participants across various age groups (20–60 y.o.), professions, and both living in urban and rural areas in the Northeastern Region of Iceland. The research team pivoted to implement analysis using grounded theory methods, employing iterative and comparative coding, concurrent data collection and analysis, and theme development directly from the collected data to ensure that theoretical insights are grounded in study participants' lived experiences. Throughout the study our sampling was adjusted to enable exploring themes emerging from interviews or filling the gaps.

The study is based on 72 in-depth interviews (Table 1) with open-ended questions conducted with female participants. These semi-structured interviews were arranged in safe places and lasted for a meantime of around 80 min (range between 1 and 2.5 h depending on participants' time availability). With the research participants' permission, the interviews were audio recorded. Participant recruitment was carried out by the Icelandic partners through several means: (1) personal contacts; (2) social media platforms (Facebook); and (3) snowball sampling to approach contacts of interview participants. The following recruitment parameters were set as the selection criteria: gender (females), age (the participants must be aged 21 years or older), and residence location during the COVID-19 pandemic (Akureyri, Húsavík, and neighboring rural settlements).

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic characteristics (number of interviews: 72).

| Variables | Category | % |
|---|---|---|
| Age | 20–29 | 7 |
| | 30–39 | 45 |
| | 40–49 | 26 |
| | 50–59 | 18 |
| | 60–69 | 4 |
| Place of residence | Akureyri | 67 |
| | Húsavík | 11 |
| | Rural areas | 22 |
| Motherhood status | Have children | 89 |
| | No children | 11 |
| Labor force status | Employed | 92 |
| | Unemployed/ In training | 7 |
| | Retired | 1 |

The participants represented a wide range of employment sectors, including higher education personnel, small business owners in design, tourism and restaurant industries, women on parental leave or engaged in studies while unemployed, healthcare professionals, public sector employees, social and childcare workers, school teachers, students, PhD candidates, academics and researchers, self-employed individuals, non-profit sector employees, government officials in both decision-making and advisory roles, as well as

workers in hospitality and tourism, and retail industries. Several participants reported experiencing job loss during the pandemic—either temporarily or persisting at the time of the interviews.

Although the proportion of immigrants in Iceland is rapidly increasing, this article primarily focuses on examining lived experiences of gender empowerment among local women.

The semi-structured interviews were designed to capture the multifaceted impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's personal and social lives, with particular attention to changes in daily routines, household responsibilities, family relationships and gender roles, social support networks, and overall well-being. Key themes also focused on identifying the challenges women faced, as well as sources of strengths of empowerment during and after the pandemic crisis.

### 2.3. Research Principles

The research team was guided by the following principles for conducting research: (a) research responsive to community needs, (b) open-ended questions that invite personal storytelling and are also practically oriented [47] (p. 158), (c) a voice-centered approach to interpretation [48] (p. 213), and (d) research verification/soliciting feedback/knowledge-sharing and reporting back to communities [49] (p. 115), among others [50] (pp. 31–33).

### 2.4. Data Analysis and Data Management

The research team implemented a content analysis using qualitative methods. We used "ATLAS.ti" software (Version 24.1.1) for thematic coding, content and discourse annotation, and qualitative analysis. The analysis began by reading the content of each interview transcript. The next step involved focusing on identifying the major themes within the personal and social domains. When analyzing primary data, the research team considered the cultural or institutional contexts in which the data were generated for potential biases. The use of interviews for research purposes was conducted with all measures to preserve the confidentiality of the respondents, particularly in light of the small size of the communities involved, and in accordance with best data management practices.

## 3. Results

The study findings presented below are organized into two parts: firstly, by highlighting the strengths of gender empowerment identified by participants, and secondly, by examining the constraints they encountered. The summarized study findings are illustrated in Table 2, providing a concise overview of the main themes and analytical insights across the personal and social domains of gender equality.

Utilizing a voice-centered methodological approach by incorporating direct quotations from interviews with female study participants ensures the authenticity of their expressed opinions. This approach also gives the opportunity to grasp the depth and nuance of participants' narratives, thus providing a more accurate and meaningful interpretation of their lived experiences.

The findings are categorized into two major groups as follows: (1) those driven by the pandemic (pandemic-driven), and (2) those persisting in the post-pandemic phase.

**Table 2.** Strengths and constraints shaping women's empowerment within the personal and social domains of gender equality during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.

| | Strengths | Constraints |
|---|---|---|
| **Personal Domain** | Ability to remain productive and pursue personal and professional growth; solution-focused mindset.<br><br>Ability to keep a positive outlook in the face of challenges.<br><br>Capacity to adapt to and gain empowerment in male-dominated spheres.<br><br>Self-empowerment through re-evaluation of women's transferable skills of unpaid labor.<br><br>Ability to access and use domestic abuse online support services.<br><br>Willingness to continue open dialogue on gender (in)equalities. | "Working yourself to the bone":<br>(a) Emotional and mental exhaustion resulting from elevated stress, workload, and the demands of the "third shift,"<br>(b) (Post-)COVID burnout and persistent fatigue.<br><br>Feeling that caregiving and domestic work go unnoticed.<br><br>Frustration over the slow pace of progress toward gender equality.<br><br>Struggling with the high cost of gender equality; reappraising traditional housewife roles as a coping strategy.<br><br>Personal reluctance to share traditionally female domains. |
| **Social Domain** | Empowerment in (re)establishing more gender-equal relationships within the household.<br><br>Utilizing dual paid parental leave as a tool for redefining gender roles within the family.<br><br>Sustaining women's social support networks.<br><br>Increasing public recognition of domestic violence issues.<br><br>Normalizing public and domestic discourse on gender disparities. | Shift back to traditional gender roles in the household.<br><br>Persistent gender division in parenting roles and traditional gender norms in child upbringing. Societal pressure of the intensive parenting model.<br><br>Striving for the ideal: The impact of gender role expectations on women:<br>(a) Pressure to be a 'Sprakki' (an exceptional woman),<br>(b) The maternal overload of the 'Super Moms,'<br>(c) Social media's impact on women's self-esteem and professional credibility.<br><br>Female-to-female criticism as a common behavioral pattern.<br><br>Resurfacing historical legacies: a resurgence of more rigid gender expectations.<br><br>Domestic violence silenced by victim-blaming, women's economic dependency, and institutional inaction.<br><br>The 'aura' of gender equality surrounding dominant public narratives. |

Source: Based on interviews with research participants.

### *3.1. The Strengths of Gender Empowerment Within the Personal Domain*

- *Ability to remain productive and pursue personal and professional growth; solution-focused mindset:* Women's narratives, shared in nearly all interviews about the pandemic period, revealed a strong sense of empowerment rooted in their ability to stay productive and pursue growth. Capacity to adapt to new realities—such as engaging in

online learning on entrepreneurial opportunities and investing in self-development—demonstrated women's strong agency and resilience:

> *"I've never been busier after the pandemic came. . ., because I just thought outside the box. I said, "If you can't do this <pre-pandemic activities–authors> anymore, let's find a way to do it!" I took a lot of online courses during the pandemic. . ., including how to start your own business. . . and some courses of self-development. . . Things didn't have to stop. You just have to think differently, think outside the box."* (Akureyri, 50s.)

> *"I think with the pandemic, you try to find things to do at home. . . I've started reading more books because I was trying to do more things for myself. . . I think it was a lot because I did not used to read that much before. . . I did some knitting in the first year. . . And also, I like to listen to podcasts–either people just chatting and it's just soothing to listen to, or I listen to stories or history. . ."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

Driven by a solution-focused mindset, three interviews pointed out that women in the reproductive age group were also able to reinterpret periods of the pandemic-driven unemployment as opportunities to successfully manage family planning, including having a child between jobs:

> *"I could not find any well qualified job because of the economic situation. . . And we have always thought about another child, but we didn't plan them so quickly. . . But because there was no really job available, and I'm back studying. We decided, "Well, okay then let's do it now because we have nothing to lose." I don't have any job to lose, I don't have any position to lose anything. So, we just, "Yeah, let's go for it." And luckily, we succeeded."* (Húsavík, 30s.)

- *Ability to keep a positive outlook in the face of challenges:* Roughly one-third of our interviews revealed women's ability to exercise agency in transforming challenges into constructive and meaningful lived experiences:

> *"I really wanted to see the positive side of it, of having more time as nobody wanted to hire me. . . The studies <sponsored by the government free online university courses during the pandemic—authors> I'm going to finish now in autumn. So that was basically my conclusion: I tried to turn all this negative stuff into something really positive."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

Some of these interviews also illuminated how, grounded in cognitive reframing and adaptive coping mechanisms, women maintained a positive outlook, along with a sense of gratitude during times of crisis:

> *"Personally, we <my family members> just profited <from the pandemic> in a positive way because my husband started to cook not three hours but five hours per day. So, the highlight of the day was dinner, and we all were waiting from 3:00 for what comes for dinner, so that was really something very positive. . ."* (Akureyri, 50s.)

> *"We realized that we were lucky. We are lucky that we can work from home, that we live in a house where everybody has their space. I didn't need to work in the kitchen, and the boys could play football in the garage and all needs were fulfilled. So yeah, I feel very lucky. I feel like we did it together."* (Akureyri, 40s.)

- Drawing on the narratives shared in two interviews, in Iceland, women also demonstrated *a capacity to both adapt to and gain empowerment in traditional male-dominated spheres*—such as video-gaming communities. As one participant shared, she used video-gaming space to create shared social experiences and to keep social connections virtually during the pandemic:

> *"I've already finished everything on Netflix… and, me and my best friend, we play games online on PlayStation, so we can talk with each other on headphones and play the game together. Like story games and all kinds… Usually, people are playing games to be competitive. We were just there for the company… We were distracting our minds by just playing video games, … so you don't have to think about everything that's going on… I think that helped us not go insane in the COVID… I got a lot of criticism from my family, especially my dad's side because I was an adult and <was not supposed to> playing video games."* (Akureyri, 40s.)

Another study participant spoke about her experience of exercising agency in navigating the predominantly male domain of gaming communities in Iceland. Not only did she launch an anti-harassment campaign to raise awareness of the issue, but she also emerged as a female gamer's voice within the gaming community and succeeded in initiating a broader public discussion aimed at challenging exclusionary norms and gender-based bullying practices within male-dominated digital subcultures:

> *"Thankfully, I'm a gamer, so during the pandemic I mostly just stayed in and played video games. That's helped me a lot through everything, and I was just able to be in my own space. I grew up with friends playing video games. But once I stepped into it fully myself, I would always be harassed… And a lot of girls started talking out and came forward because in the pandemic a lot of women started to play more video games because it was the only thing that they could do… And I actually complained about how women were being treated in video games on a Facebook group with most men in Iceland, which kind of exploded. And I was on the news, newspapers, radio and all that… And yeah, I kind of became a voice for the women… So that helped me keep my mind focused during the pandemic."* (The location is anonymized to protect the participant's privacy, 20s.)

- *Self-empowerment through re-evaluation of women's transferable skills of unpaid labor:* As one participant shared, for mothers (re)entering the job market after the pandemic or maternity leave, self-empowerment is an important step that can be implemented through the personal reflection and critical re-evaluation of their unpaid domestic labor. Although not a common practice, many of them as potential candidates have great experience in practicing highly important skills for any job. Such transferable skills include multitasking, time management, and organizational capacity. Re-evaluating and articulating these competencies as part of a professional portfolio strengthens women's positioning in the labor market by validating their continuous skill development outside formal employment:

  > *"I actually think when women are applying for jobs, you should have a resume with your paid jobs and… your unpaid experiences because there's so much I've done that wasn't something I would put on a resume but shows how I'm organized, like being a stay-at-home mom, doing my master's thesis, teaching <sports> classes for kids and still holding some <work> shifts at the <sport facility>—that needs so much organization. It needs so much of me planning ahead, being completely true to my plan, following through on every end and keeping a household together. I was great at that. But when someone asks you about what experience you in a workplace, it's like none. But I did all this. This is something only a woman could do… Men maybe also can but usually they don't have to."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

- *Ability to access and use domestic abuse online support services:* In nearly one-tenth of the interviews, women's ability to utilize online domestic abuse support services during the COVID-19 pandemic and aftermath was acknowledged as an act of empowerment, particularly in smaller communities where access to confidential support is very limited. As one participant noted, the pandemic crisis not only heightened

the need for these services but also expanded communication pathways, enabling women to overcome social barriers and become more confident in reporting abuse and seeking help:

*"In the smaller communities, it's even harder for women to seek help. But now, I think that COVID also taught women how to use computers to reach out… Women are more prepared to talk to someone on the computer because in COVID we had to. So that's something that the pandemic, I think, gave us more readiness to use different communications."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

- Expressed in thirteen interviews, women's *willingness to continue open and meaningful dialogue on gender (in)equality*—and to advocate for longitudinal research on the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic—reflects their readiness for critical reflection and a determination to ensure that the lessons learned are no longer overlooked, as well as their readiness to be more active agents shaping the discourse on gender issues in times of crises:

*"I think that's very important to do a longitudinal study on this <COVID-19 impacts on gender equality and on women–authors>… But it's almost like we are not ready to look into the rear-view mirror… There were a lot of things that we started to discuss <during the pandemic on gender issues–authors>–about Icelandic society, about female occupations, and how much pressure and stress and burden was on these female jobs, but in a way it seems that we kind of stopped talking about it… It would be good to keep it going if we want to make differences or some changes in those situations."* (Akureyri, 50s.)

An important observation here is that, overall, all interview participants demonstrated a strong and often elaborate awareness of the principles underlying gender equality. In many respects, women's views have been shaped by sustained efforts from both governmental and non-governmental actors, which have positioned gender equality as a national priority and an integral part of the modern national identity.

### *3.2. Constraints to Gender Empowerment Within Personal Domain*

- *"Working yourself to the bone":* The multifaceted pressures during the pandemic and its aftermath led many women to overextend themselves, often to the point of emotional and mental exhaustion, resulting in burnout, as illustrated in the findings below.

*(a) Emotional and mental exhaustion resulting from elevated stress, workload, and the demands of the "third shift"* were particularly challenging for women with children who experience difficulties adapting to significantly increased caregiving roles. As articulated by a research participant,

*"It became the woman's job–figuring everything out on their own, just like the household, wearing masks and having small children and keeping the kids safe. So, the women who have a lot more responsibilities at the home, the COVID, the disease, it just became one of their responsibilities… I think it just added onto everything. Everything got a bit more difficult and added loneliness, isolation. And I also think that added stress often makes the household worse."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

The narratives of our female participants, in roughly half of the interviews, revealed that the popular path for women in Iceland toward greater empowerment through educational advancement often involves a high personal cost—particularly for mothers with toddlers during the pandemic, as intensified caregiving responsibilities created additional workload. This pressure to succeed simultaneously across multiple domains—often with limited support—frequently comes at the cost of undermining women's phys-

ical and mental well-being and may, over time, constrain their capacity to sustain long-term empowerment:

> *"I started my master's degree because I knew I was going to need some money, but I would also have to stay at home. I started it when I was pregnant, and I had a kid at home. I was a hundred percent at school and then a hundred percent mom… It was the most horrible time of my life being at home. And then there was COVID, and… I was pushed to the corner… but I did it, it worked. But there was a price to pay. If anyone asks me if they should do their studies and be a stay-at-home mom because they don't have any other ways to get paid, I always say, "Yes, you can do it, but don't do it! Find another solution"."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

Another constraint that may limit women's capacity for empowerment as was mentioned in more than half of interviews is the burden of the "*third shift*," also called the mental load, or "invisible labor," that refers to unseen mental chores in the household, for example, general planning, organization, and coordination of family events, budgeting, and preparation of family daily activities. Our research participants shared both personal experiences and observations that in smaller and strongly family-oriented Icelandic communities in the Northeast Region, with a return to more traditional family roles, the third shift became increasingly overwhelming during the pandemic and its aftermath:

> *"COVID, in a way, revealed how—because when you had to reorganize the daily life of the family,—gendered that process actually was and… also, both emotional and mental labor is much more on the women than the men, or the mothers rather than the fathers, in households with children."* (Akureyri, 50s.)

> *"Women take care of both the children, the elderly, their parents, their grandmother and grandfather for free. We do a lot of this for free. The third shift and the second and the third shift. But … the whole economy system, it wouldn't work if it weren't doing this unpaid job. But also in Iceland, we're also doing our job every day, full-time job. And also doing these unpaid jobs on the side."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

> *"They say there's more equality… But in my home, I'm the one who's thinking about everything that needs to be done, and I have the schedule. And I just texted my husband to tell him, "Remember to pick up this and do that".* (Akureyri, 30s.)

> *"Of course, more responsibilities are on my shoulders. That's how it is. Who knows how big shoes the kids use?… I know every number, everything for every kid. My husband does not have a clue. I know what toys from whom they got these presents. He does not know a thing. They call it Iceland the "third shift."… I think, of course, there are men that are thinking about that, too, but it's more common that women are experiencing that this is their responsibility. Because we have to, because we are responsible for the kids."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

Also, as expressed by nearly half of participants during the interviews, the government's prioritization of physical health over mental well-being, combined with a limited mental health infrastructure and lack of insurance coverage for these services, imposed additional constraints on women's empowerment in the personal domain—particularly during a time when emotional strain was significantly heightened:

> *"In a way, broken situation like mental situation people finding themselves in as a result of COVID. In many ways, I feel science doesn't really fully grasp the consequences of this isolation many faced… My fear is that… it may actually get worsened because it's like having a trauma that you never recognized…. So, there is very little chance that it just goes away."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

> *"I'm still waiting to see a psychologist. I've been on a waiting list for over a year–even with escalated severe depression from these two years. . . That's an ongoing problem in Iceland. We don't have enough medical care. . . and it's not covered by our national health insurance. So, most people with mental health issues probably don't have that type of income to afford that. They are falling more into a pattern of depression and anxiety and lack of income."* (Akureyri, 40s.)

(b) It was noted in thirty-four participants' narratives, many women experience *post-COVID burnout and persistent fatigue* as a result of their disproportionate exposure to caregiving, emotional labor, and frontline responsibilities during the pandemic. This not only interrupts women's continued engagement in the labor market and undermines their overall professional growth, but also negatively affects their daily lives:

> *". . . <Post-COVID> burnout has been on the rise, especially among women. Women who are the general teachers are going into long-term sick leave now. . . I think, if we are going to have many women going into burnout and falling off the labor market or falling out of their daily lives, not necessarily only the labor market, I think. . . some measures need to be taken. . .to prevent that, not only to keep the labor market going, but more for the welfare of the families. Because it's going to be really difficult to get back from, because it has been a spiral down because <stress and work overload> kept on going for such a long time. That is something that the municipalities really need to address."* (Akureyri, 50s.)

> *"I think many people here are on anxiety meds and a lot of people have depression. . . And everyone has burnout. . . I think women are, not maybe overworking ourselves, we just have these expectations that they <women> have to do everything."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

- *Feeling that caregiving and domestic work go unnoticed*: Insights from the lived experiences of nearly one-fifth of the interviewed women in heterosexual relationships demonstrated that caregiving and domestic responsibilities are often perceived as invisible or taken for granted. This lack of recognition for unpaid labor not only reinforces traditional gender hierarchies within the household but also limits women's empowerment through diminishing their sense of agency and worth. As one participant shared,

> *"I think sometimes women are taken for granted. Everything we do is what we are. That's very disappointing,—being a woman that you are, doing doing your best, raising kids, having a home, holding these things all together with your glue. And you experience that it's not appreciated. And they <men> don't think it's that important."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

- *Frustration over the slow pace of progress toward gender equality*: Nearly one-fifth of the study participants observed a growing sense of frustration over the post-pandemic rollback in gender equality. This disillusionment arises from the fact that, despite decades of gender equality advocacy, deeply embedded traditional norms in both public and private spheres continue to reinforce gender inequalities in times of crises like the pandemic:

> *"I think people forget how much work our mothers, grandmothers had to fight for what we have today. . . And we have been fighting for the last decades. I think it's weird that we are still there. . ."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

> *"It's so weird <to have this rollback during the pandemic–authors> because we have come so far regarding gender equality."* (Akureyri, 20s.)

- *Struggling with the high cost of gender equality: Reappraising traditional housewife roles as a coping strategy:* As expressed in one-tenth of the interviews, a growing tension between empowerment and exhaustion has been emerging since the pandemic, with women paying a high personal cost in the pursuit of gender equality. In the context of Iceland's smaller northern communities, this involves balancing paid work, domestic

responsibilities, and high societal expectations. As a result, one interview narrative even signaled a potential inclination to reappraise traditional housewife roles as a coping mechanism:

> "*In general, I love working… But still, I keep thinking how much easier life would be if we were just gone back to how things used to be where there was just one person going out <for work–authors>. The husband would go out, work, you would just stay home with kids. Because balancing all this work, household cleaning and containing the image that you're supposed to have as a woman nowadays… You're supposed to always look your best!*" (Akureyri, 30s.)

- *Reluctance to share traditionally female domains:* During the interviews, three female participants mentioned that they often observe the reluctance to fully share traditionally female domestic domains with male partners. For some women, this may reflect internalized traditional gender norms combined with a sense of strength, agency, and leadership within female-designated domains. This can also be a demonstrated capacity to practice self-reliant approaches to addressing problems, which, in turn, is further reinforced by perceptions that sharing responsibilities and seeking help can be interpreted as a sign of weakness. Another common assumption mentioned by our study participants is that men typically lack the necessary skills or attentiveness to detail required for tasks such as cooking and cleaning—ultimately serving to justify gendered divisions of labor within the home. As one interview revealed, men's initial efforts to engage more equally in household responsibilities can be met with misunderstanding and can result in miscommunication:

> "*One woman here started new relationships, and she found a fantastic man who was willing to help because she has a pretty difficult job, and kids, and everything. He said, "Don't worry, I will take care of the laundry. I will clean the floor, don't worry." And she felt like, "But why is he doing this, am I not capable? I'm what, not perfect anymore? Do I need help or something?" And this kind of feeling of high discomfort that "This is my domain," like my kitchen. So, we have to learn how to share and trust men that they can actually do laundry. And it's also discouraging. That's why I always say we need to work together <on gender equality>, we cannot put too much pressure on men. But then we also have to understand that there's nothing wrong with us needing help and getting help. Why should we not just say, "Oh, thank you, you made the dinner, oh, thank you!" No. In the beginning, when <my partner> started cooking, I was like, "This is not how I do it." No, because you were not cooking. So, I have been there myself. But you really need to work on it if you want to get some assistance… and also be thankful. This is a problem that we <women> are making in many cases, we are making life much more difficult than it needs to be–to ourselves. Also, men might feel really pitiful. They tried and everyone is talking about gender equality now–and they <might feel like they–authors> completely failed…*" (Rural community, 40s.)

### *3.3. The Strengths of Gender Empowerment Within the Social Domain*

- *Empowerment to (re)establish more gender-equal relationships within the household:* As emerged from five interviews, for many women—particularly mothers returning to work—the post-pandemic period served as an important turning point, offering both the opportunity and compelling rationale to (re)negotiate more gender-equal relationships within the household, especially in relation to childcare. These acts of empowerment are often grounded in Icelandic women's strong grasp of gender equality principles and their ability to critically reflect on household dynamics during the pandemic and a significant shift toward more conventional gender norms in the family (re)entrenched during the pandemic. As one participant noted,

> *"I know a lot of ways to make my home equal. And we've been doing things to make it more equal. My husband has to worry about the kids now. I am going to work overtime. And it's not perhaps because I have to. It's because I can. I'm going to now, because he did that for years. Now I'm doing it. The first times I worked overtime, he was like, "What am I supposed to do with the kids? I have to go grocery shopping."—"If you can't take both kids, you can find someone to take care of one kid and take the other kid with you."—"Who am I going to call?"—"I don't know. I don't care. Just find someone that's good enough to take care of your kids. They have two grandmas. They have two granddads. Call them."—"Oh, I'm supposed to call your parents?"—"You can do that. We've been married for years. You can actually just call my parents."—"Oh yeah. Yeah, I'll try that." He didn't have the social knowledge that he could do that."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

Importantly, the efforts to achieve more equality in the household is perceived as a predominantly female domain. Eleven interviews highlighted that these are women who initiate and take the lead in discussions (re)negotiating more equally or equally shared domestic unpaid work, including household chores and childcare responsibilities. This is a long-term persistent effort that involves both emotional and cognitive labor and often requires sensitive communication and a delicate approach. These efforts add additional toll on "invisible labor," also called the "third shift" in Iceland—another domestic domain that is disproportionately shouldered by women:

> *"During the pandemic there was a regression in gender equality. . . I feel like every time there is a regression, and we have to fall back into the roles, it takes time, effort, energy from women to get out of the hole. . . like micromanaging the whole home. <In my family–authors> I feel that we're in a balance now, but it has taken us a year of me working <after the pandemic> and still me managing the house. So, now we are co-managing the home, but it took time and effort, and the effort was mine."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

- *Utilizing dual paid parental leave as a tool for redefining gender roles within the family:* Although, as stated by our female participants in nine interviews, the new reform on paternal leave will take some time to influence parental roles in the household, there is a strong assumption that more or less equally shared parental leave serves as an important policy instrument for redefining traditional gender roles within the family. "Forced" fathers' greater involvement in childrearing and household responsibilities during those months may lead to more balanced responsibility sharing in the future:

  > *"One of the aspects of parental leave. . . is that you cannot give all of it to the mother. The months that the fathers should also take was in part a very progressive law because the ideology is so, it was trying to change the roles within the home. I think we are on the way there, but we haven't gotten there yet."* (Akureyri, 50s.)

  > *"I experience in everyday life that women and men live a very separate life on paper. The fathers are required to stay home on paternity leave, which is really great because. . . that's forcing the man also to stay home. . . But what I see is that women stay home much, much longer. It's the men who just take the minimum amount <of this parental leave>, and that's it."* (Húsavík, 30s.)

- Twelve interviews highlighted the importance of *sustaining women's social support networks during the pandemic.* These networks, particularly those organized by and for women, played a crucial role in fostering resilience and well-being, especially when formal institutional support was limited. In Iceland, alongside long-time functioning Facebook Mom's groups, these grass-rooted online-based initiatives—such as "From Women For Women" in Akureyri—demonstrated agency and gendered solidarity:

> *"There are some programs in Akureyri. For example, there is one volunteer organization, "From Women For Women," where you can get online counseling for all kinds of questions in life. But this is online and Akureyri has these organizations for women especially where you can go to if you have questions, but we don't have that in the countryside."* (Húsavík, 30s.)

At the national level, immigrant women established grassroots online networks providing peer-to-peer emotional support and psychological counseling tailored to the specific needs of immigrant women during the crisis. These self-organized platforms addressed critical social service gaps left by public institutions and proved especially vital for immigrant women living in smaller remote communities and rural settlements, where access to formal support systems remained limited:

> *"These were a few self-help groups <for immigrants> which they created to support each other. . . I witnessed there were some Facebook groups, specially created, like the women's group in Reykjavík, they offered psychological help. And this help was also professional. There were some psychologists behind, and that's good. You could call, or you could write, which I thought was great. In English, at least, it was announced. They were much more flexible than any of the municipality systems. . ."* (Akureyri, 50s.)

- *Increasing public recognition of domestic violence issues:* The pandemic prompted an increase in public recognition of domestic violence as a serious societal issue, leading to awareness campaigns and systems of prevention and support. In nearly a quarter of the interviews, our study participants noted that initiatives such as emergency hotlines were introduced to address the rise in domestic violence against women. This positive trend was signaling a shift toward more open public acknowledgment of existing problems in gender-based violence and strengthening a better support system for women—both from the government and private donors—to address women's safety issues:

  > *"They tried to bring more public awareness about the increase in violence against women in Iceland because of the pandemic. Also, they opened some kind of hotline for that, where you could call."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

- *Normalizing public and domestic discourse on gender disparities:* Insights from seven interviews brought to light that opening a public dialogue on television and other mainstream media platforms about aggravated gender disparities during the COVID-19 pandemic was a very progressive step for Icelandic society. Admitting the existence of issues pertaining to an increase in women's burden of household responsibilities, higher-risk and lower-paid female occupations during the pandemic, and issues of "silenced" domestic violence and abuse has not only increased general societal awareness but also played an important role in normalizing conversations around gender disparities, including discussions about it at home:

  > *"There are so many discussions, now it's about the "third shift"—when women take on planning and telling the partner, "You have to do this now," and later supervising the home or managing the home and everything. I think in my relationship, we have talked a lot about it because of this discussion. So, that's definitely an improvement!"* (Akureyri, 20s.)

### *3.4. Constraints to Gender Empowerment Within Social Domain*

- *Shift back to traditional gender roles in the households*: Based on lived experiences and observations of more than half of our study participants, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a regression toward more traditional gender roles within many households—regardless of parental status or previously more gender-equitable partnerships:

> *"I know that women often have responsibilities over the home–it's our field. It's our responsibility to take care of the kids. And even though we have progressive husbands that are not trying to adhere to <traditional—authors> gender roles, we still fall into the traps."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

> *"I have been living with my boyfriend for many years. And we have always had a really gender equal relationship and we have done things together and he does this, and I do this. We do not have children, so our home life wasn't really extremely affected <by the pandemic>. What happened was that I needed to move my work to my home, but my boyfriend was able to work not from home during the whole pandemic... And for the first time, I will say that he was often surprised like, "You have been at home all day, why is this not..." So that was a change for sure, and I was annoyed because I was always saying, "I know I am home all the time, but I am working. I am not just lying and watching Netflix..."* (Akureyri, 20s.)

> *"Women were stuck at home with kids... As for husbands, their jobs were necessary, and they needed to go into work while the women could opt for being at home with the kids, if not essential workers. So, they often stayed home maybe by choice at first, but then it became something they needed to do to keep the home afloat..."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

- *Persistent gender division in parenting roles and traditional gender norms in child upbringing*: In Iceland, as indicated by nearly one-quarter of our participants, there is a growing trend of a greater paternal involvement in childrearing that is often expressed through participation in children's hobbies and sports. At the same time, it also reflects gendered preferences and gendered division of parental involvement in children's activities. Fathers often have priority to choose what they prefer to do and are more likely to partake in traditionally masculine activities—such as sports—while showing lower interest in participation in areas like music or arts-related extracurricular activities. In the words of one participant,

> *"It seems like fathers, they are happy to be more involved, but they want to be involved in those activities they can actually enjoy so if this is their shared interest, then they will participate with great enthusiasm. As research indicates that they seem to have been able to pick more of the responsibilities they like. Icelandic fathers' involvement with their children has been growing... But what seems to be happening is, yes, great fathers spend more time with their children, but they spend different time than the mothers. They're more playing and having fun... It's taking care that the kids don't get too bored. I think the soccer involvement is a part of this, that it seems that they are able to pick what interests them when it comes to spending time with the children... I would guess not having any data behind me that in many families, the fathers would spend more time with their sons than their daughters... Biking has been picking up and becoming a very popular sport. You would see father and son go out biking together. It's very often related to their <fathers'–authors> own interests. Soccer is quite popular, and because so many kids <still mainly boys–authors> practice soccer, it becomes maybe one of the fields that are most obvious in this aspect... And video gaming, yes... Based on how many parents talk about these things, I mean, even though we want to be not very traditional, we are."* (Akureyri, 50s.)

In many instances, as our participants illustrated, the division of parental responsibilities remains profoundly gendered, with fathers more frequently engaged in leisure-oriented activities, while mothers are typically tasked with routine, domestic household responsibilities that are not only largely undervalued but also do not constitute "quality time":

> *"Father may take the kids out for whatever, to walk or to play soccer on Saturday, and the mother cleans the house... To be a good father has a completely different meaning than to*

*be a good mother. It doesn't necessarily involve responsibility. It's more like spending time enjoying, being a playful father. If you are an involved father, you get praised a lot. But if you're not, it doesn't matter."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

According to the experiences shared by three study participants, we can identify additional layers of complexity in gendered childrearing that subtly reassert traditional gender roles. It can be considered another Icelandic paradox–while these are mostly women striving for gender empowerment and more equality, it is frequently mothers who, perhaps unintentionally, reinforce conventional gender norms by using highly gendered forms of expression, such as dressing daughters as princesses and sons as superheroes and thus reasserting binary conceptions of femininity and masculinity from an early age for many Icelandic kids:

"*And I can even already see it in the little girls… among the Icelandic kids, the girls are always dressed up already from one year old, and dress nice hairdos whatsoever. Some jewelry even. Princesses… And the boys are dark blue, black, boys, spider-man, Batman, whatsoever… And this comes from the women, I don't think that's the dads who are dressing the little girls as little princesses and can see that they're all active on Instagram and social media. So, it kind of repeats itself, unfortunately."* (Húsavík, 30s.)

- *Societal pressure of the intensive parenting model:* This relatively recent model of intensive parenting—also referred to as "helicopter" or "bulldozer" parenting—has emerged as a dominant norm of "good parenting" in Iceland, influenced by modern American childrearing concepts. One of our study participants critically noted that this obsession with intensive parenting reinforces gendered divisions of parenting labor, as mothers are predominantly the ones tasked with picking up children from school and driving them to multiple extracurricular activities. It also contributes to maternal burnout and may hinder children's development of autonomy and competence that might require greater parent supervision in the future. Reinvigorated after the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions, intensive parenting is increasingly incompatible with the demands of full-time employment. It may also constrain mothers' personal autonomy, diminishes quality family and "me" time, and it limits their ability to pursue greater achievements in social, professional, and political spheres:

"*I think it has been happening just in the last 10 or 15 years… a lot of kids have two to three extracurricular– soccer training, handball, and go to music school, plus they will maybe dance or gymnastics or hockey or whatever. It's a lot of driving! The schedule in Icelandic families is really, really packed. And Akureyri is a small city. We have every opportunity to live quite slow and good lives. But we have imported American culture of intensive parenting… And what has changed is that you are not only taking your kid to practice. You have wait there and watch. So, you are not only driving. You are staying in… This American culture intensive parenting is almost impossible with labor force participation that you have in Iceland. You either have the mothers not working, or you have full-time nannies that take care of this, but in Iceland we don't have that so much, so it's the parents running around… <During the pandemic>, when we knew that we were kind of safe, I think people found that the Covid life was much less stressful, and a lot of <people> talked about quality time, that it was like a quality time for the family… A lot of the parents talked about the relief that you don't have to be everywhere, you don't need to be running around all the afternoons and driving around, and getting kids into different places."* (Akureyri, 50s.)

- Striving for the ideal: The impact of gender role expectations on women:

*(a) Pressure to be a 'Sprakki':* The modern interpretation of being a '*Sprakki*'—an extraordinary, high-achieving woman—places immense pressure on women in Iceland to succeed

simultaneously in physical appearance, motherhood, household management, education, and the professional sphere. As nearly one-third of participant narratives revealed, this idealized social standard—often imposed by women themselves—ultimately constrains their empowerment by fostering burnout and feelings of "being not perfect," which were significantly intensified during the pandemic:

> *"Of course, you have to be perfect yourself. You have to go to the gym, you have to be fit, you have to have a beautiful home, you have to have beautiful kids, and everything has to be picture perfect–as you can see in social media. And that's impossible! We know that. And I think that's the reason why people have burnouts or have these crashes because you cannot live up to the expectations, maybe that you make yourself."* (Akureyri, 40s.)

> *"You have to have a nice family, and everyone has to be perfect. You must have different activities, and you must work, of course, and have a nice home, and always have to look nice. And there's no time to do it all! <Where do these expectations for women come from?—interviewer>—Women themselves."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

> *"You can never be not perfect! There's this horrible thing happening now where you just can't kind of misstep on anything. You are supposed to be a hundred percent good mother every single day, every hour of the day, every minute of the day. You are supposed to always look your best. Then you should also have a nice Instagram, a nice Facebook. You should have a nice career, you should have a fancy house, or a good-looking house–it's the standard of life nowadays. And that did not change even during the pandemic at all. It's mind blowing to me!"* (Akureyri, 30s.)

Additionally, social norms increasingly frame higher education and full-time employment as essential benchmarks of women's success as well as important milestones in achieving full gender equality. While such expectations can be empowering, they may also reinforce gendered pressures by imposing "one-size-fits-all" narrow standards that ignore the realities of women's caregiving responsibilities—particularly within the context of an intensive mothering model. As our interviewees noted,

> *"It always comes down to a choice. . . If a woman chooses to have a part-time job or only work at home, then society is kind of, "Oh, you're not working. You're not working full-time." . . . Because in Iceland, the emphasis is so much on you just work, and work, and work. And if you're not working all the time, it's because you're lazy. Both for men and women. But women are more often in part-time jobs. So, I think they get this more often. It's the old sentence, "Oh, you're just a housewife." . . . And many women decide to get another university degrees, because maybe it's an excuse for working less outside the home. If you feel like not going to be working full time, then you still need to do something. . ."* (Akureyri, 50s.)

> *"I think <this need to demonstrate high productivity was strengthened–authors> even more during and after the Corona, because you were staying at home, you had to prove you were doing something, and you couldn't go to work. So, you had to show everybody that you were really active and still doing things."* (Rural community, 50s.)

*(b) The maternal overload of the 'Super Moms'*: Narratives from our study participants illustrated how the internalized pressure to live up to the 'Super Mom' ideal—physically fit, educated, professionally accomplished exceptional caregiver and household coordinator—pushes many women to constantly prove their value, both to others and themselves. This costly striving for recognition as a 'Super Mom' was not diminished but rather intensified during the pandemic, pushing women even further, and possibly beyond the limits:

> "*Everybody is trying to be the Super Mom. Have three or four degrees in university and have five kids and a nice house. . . It's this need to be seen and to be appreciated. . . I think it's a very high cost for the family.*" (Rural community, 50s.)

> "*And then again, it's all so gendered–manicures, spa salons. We're doing this because society expects us to look a certain way. . . I struggled after the first kid to get back into shape, because that's my responsibility. So, on top of just birthing a child and struggling with breastfeeding, I was going to CrossFit and dyeing my hair. . ., and everyone looked at it like, "Yes, it's quality time." But it's not quality time. . .it hurts your nails, colors your hair with horrible chemicals, doing these things to our bodies just so we can fit into 'Super Mom' boxes. It's a regression, if we're going to do this. We're all just trying to do what we can to survive. And a part of that is looking good, being put together.*" (Akureyri, 30s.)

*(c) Social media's impact on women's self-esteem and professional credibility*: Almost two-thirds of the interview narratives brought to light how social media platforms became saturated with idealized images of 'super moms' in northern communities of Iceland. The pressure to meet these social expectations became even stronger during the COVID-19 pandemic, as women increasingly shared content to demonstrate their productivity and success. As our interviewees emphasized, such portrayals contributed to diminished self-esteem among women, many of whom began to question their ability to cope during times of crisis:

> "*About the image and the pressure of being perfect. I think social media plays a lot in these standards. . . When COVID started, some families and especially mothers, post on Instagram or Facebook that they were homeschooling, that they were making these plans, they were baking, doing such great things with their kids– all these things. That's a very interesting combination–the social expectations and how you internalized them. I think a lot of people are very aware of it not being <the whole picture–authors>, as this is some glossy image that you see on social media, but at the same time you feel the pressure because some are doing all this, so everybody must be doing it, and I need to do it. But how are you going to live up to this?. . . It becomes really complicated to navigate all these expectations that are put upon women. I would really like that we break this vicious cycle. It would be very, very good for Icelandic families. . . and it would also slow the pace down a little bit. . .*" (Akureyri, 50s.)

> "*The peers in my age sometimes have the feeling that they're reducing themselves a lot. And social media of course doesn't really help to make the situation better. . . they have these influencers. . . what are they focusing on? Beauty, makeup, decorating your home, really nice Instagramable, having pretty children, those kinds of things, which usually don't bring you anywhere in life, but they look nice. . . I think this has not changed since the pandemic. What has changed is that women are more focused on having an even more beautiful home because they spend a lot of time at home. . .*" (Húsavík, 30s.)

> "*Everybody knows that nobody is perfect. But when you look at Instagram, you start doubting yourself, why can I not do as good as this person or that person?*" (Rural community, 40s.)

Another interview noted an adverse effect was the undermining of women's professional credibility, as highly gendered self-representations with emphasis on traditional family roles visually left little to no space for their professional aspirations:

> "*And I think if you are having a business and if you are only putting up some glamour <on social media>, then people start losing faith in what you're doing. That is my perspective on it. . . And because I'm fixing this, I often break things. So sometimes I put it on*

*Facebook or Instagram to say, "Not the perfect day. Let's do better tomorrow!" Because I don't want people to think that I'm just here <sitting on social media all day–authors>. . ."* (Rural community, 40s.)

- As expressed by roughly one-tenth of our study respondents, *female-to-female criticism as a common behavioral pattern* that often goes along with competition poses a significant constraint to women's empowerment in the social domain. As evidenced in participant narratives, women are frequently scrutinized by other women—a dynamic that erodes mutual solidarity and weakens trust-based support networks, which are the pillars for fostering collective progress toward gender equality:

  "*And I think we <women> are very critical of each other. . . We are always criticizing. . ."* (Akureyri, 40s.)

  "*When I was growing up, people were really much talking about the appearances of women. . . And I think that has changed a little bit, but still today. . . women <form newer generations–authors> probably tend to compete even more with each other. Who is the better Super Mom. . . I think that's a common thing nowadays."* (Rural community, 50s.)

- *Resurfacing historical legacies: A resurgence of more rigid gender expectations:* The interview narrative highlighted a perceived re-emergence of historically entrenched gender expectations, indicating a return to rigid norms that once confined women to domestic roles—now compounded by the simultaneous expectation of high participation in the labor market. This dual burden reflects how women in northern communities of Iceland are caught between modern ideals and traditional roles, which, in turn, is likely to complicate their pathways to empowerment:

  "*For women of my mother's generation, she was born in 1930. . .demands were very clear. . . You should work at home. You should be a housewife. You should give your children three meals a day. You should iron your husband's shirts. And it was quite strict. And I think women strived to be perfect. But in those days only a few of them had work outside the home, so, it was a little bit easier to be perfect. . . But I think then you have the hippies. . ., a bit of rebellion. So, maybe people of my age got the best period because the demands were not as obvious. But now, with the younger women, I feel like we are back to these strict regulations. "You should be this way and that way." And it worries me."* (Akureyri, 50s.)

- According to the accounts of eleven study participants, women's empowerment in the social domain is significantly constrained by *domestic violence silenced by victim-blaming, women's economic dependency, and institutional inaction* in adequately investigating or prosecuting offenders:

  "*The men <in cases like sexual abuse> are often family men and women often start talking "He has five kids, he has a wife. I don't want him to be taken away from his kids." And if you report. . . then you would be the one to be blamed for him losing his kids, and not him–for violently abusing you or sexually assaulting you. . . If we look how many rapes are happening. . . Statistics reflects only people that come to them. . . And we know that women do not want to go to the police. . . because going through this system is just another type of abuse. It takes two years to even get them started on your case. They get all of your case notes, they get all of your doctor's notes there. The pictures of your naked body are in files for evidence, if you have any visible bruises. . . And then some researcher in some department in Akureyri is just going to look at the pictures, "Well, it could be after you bumped your head somewhere else." Most of the rape charges are dropped because it's usually word against word."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

In the words of our participants, gender-based violence and the gender income gap are mutually reinforcing structural inequality. In abusive relationships, women's economic disempowerment heightens their vulnerability by constraining their capacity to leave the abusive partner:

> *"I see the problems everywhere. Women are suffering more in silence because they're scared, and they're scared of losing. Women are staying in abusive relationships even more now <after the pandemic> because of the inflation. Because if they become single mothers, they would not afford paying rent, they would not be able to afford anything, they would be out on the street. . . At least they have a roof over their head if they stay in the relationship, and for their kids."* (Akureyri, 30s.)

> *"<Even after the pandemic-authors>, I would say that life-threatening violence. . . it's here. People aren't searching for help every day, but there are people in dire need every day. . . These women are not able to press charges against their perpetrators. They're not able to leave them. They're not able to leave their houses. They are out of jobs, out of money, out of opportunities. They are stuck in their apartments. One of them has a disabled child that she has to take care of every day and she cannot leave her apartment. So yes, violence here is grave."* (This citation has been fully anonymized to protect the participant's privacy).

- *The 'aura' of gender equality surrounding a dominant public narrative*: In one of the interviews, a participant expressed concern over the becoming dominant political narrative framing Iceland as a "gender equality paradise." This "aura of equality" fosters a collective belief that discourages critical reflection, making it difficult to acknowledge and openly and meaningfully discuss areas where gender inequality persists and patterns are in need of attention and improvement:

> *"'Iceland is a gender paradise,'—which it isn't, even though we are doing better than other countries. There's the "aura of gender equality," and we tend to overlook realities because we want to believe that–and that general discourse is about—how great we are when it comes to gender equality. It's often very difficult for people to accept or to talk about that here <in Iceland-authors> because the assumption is that we are so gender equal, and it becomes difficult for people, especially the women, to admit that their households are not so gender equal. It's that general discourse has made people believe that if the household is not gender equal or the couple is not dividing equally the division of labor at home, that's an exception. But, of course, that's not an exception. That's more the reality of most people here. . ."* (Akureyri, 50s.)

## 4. Discussion

In alignment with the research goal and objectives, our study identified key impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in the Northeastern Region of Iceland as well as strengths of and constraints to gender empowerment within the personal and social domains of gender equality during the COVID-19 crisis and recovery (see Table 2). Among these pandemic-driven experiences, many represent pre-existing processes and trends exacerbated and rearticulated during the pandemic.

The uniqueness of this study lies in its application of a conceptual framework that combines strength-based and deficit-based analyses to explore women's experiences. To promote a voice-centered methodological approach that amplifies study participants' voices, the paper integrated direct quotations, allowing women's narratives to be meaningfully presented and heard.

To some extent, the study findings reflect patterns identified in the previous literature on *strengths* contributing to women's empowerment within the *personal domain* of

gender equality. In addition to exercising their agency by seeking opportunities for personal and professional growth, and ability to re-evaluate and translate their maternal parenting 'managerial skills' into competencies applicable to professional jobs, women also demonstrated solution-oriented behavior during the crisis, particularly in making strategic family planning decisions. This aligns with the existing literature on reproductive behavior during the pandemic in Iceland and other Nordic countries, where women used the temporary pause in labor market participation as an opportunity to have children, as also reflected in statistics showing a pandemic-driven, short-term fertility boom, as reported by Arnalds [51], Neyer et al. [52], Lappegård et al. [53], and Nisén et al. [54]. Our analysis also supports and expands upon previous research on women's empowerment in traditionally male-dominated domains by Sigurðardóttir [55] and Styhre et al. [56], including the video-gaming community, where women often encounter harassment and gender stereotyping, also within the Nordic context. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this domain became increasingly appealing to women, prompting their proactive efforts to challenge gender stereotypes, foster more equitable relationships, and strengthen the female gaming communities.

Notably, all interview participants demonstrated a strong and often elaborate understanding of the principles underlying gender equality, which serves not only as a foundation for their personal empowerment but also reflects their willingness and capacity to engage in open and meaningful public dialogue on pressing gender equality issues in Iceland. In many ways, this is the result of gender equality becoming a deeply embedded agenda over the past few decades across all sectors of life, including politics, the labor market, pre-school and school education, academia, and family policies [9,11,57–59].

The study identified multiple *constraints* to female empowerment within the personal domain. The interviews revealed that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were highly gendered, highlighting intensified caregiving responsibilities, elevated stress levels, increased workloads, and feelings of loneliness experienced by women. Similar findings were documented at the global level [60–63] and in the Icelandic context [32,33,35,64] The interviewees placed particular emphasis on the concept of the "third shift" [65,66] that refers to the "invisible labor" associated with the cognitive dimension of household management—planning and organizing family activities, budgeting, and overseeing—in addition to the first shift (paid work) and second shift (domestic labor) [67]. Insights from our interviews indicate that the division of cognitive labor is highly gendered, with women's contributions to this "invisible" household work being even more disproportionate than their share of the second shift—physical domestic tasks—as also reflected in the works by Ciciolla and Luthar [68], Aviv et al. [69], and Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir [32]. This pattern is further corroborated by an Iceland national survey, which found that 76% of women in heterosexual relationships reported carrying the third shift in their households, compared to just 6% of men [70]. Our findings highlight that this third shift overload, particularly under crisis conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in considerable emotional and mental strain for women, and especially mothers. Collectively, these pressures drove women to 'work themselves to the bone.' The study also identified a concerning pattern that after the pandemic, women in northern communities of Iceland are experiencing ongoing difficulties with recovery and persistent (post-)COVID burnout. These challenges were compounded by the limited availability of mental health support services specifically designed to address women's needs, and particularly those of mothers. Coupled with frustration over the slow progress and setbacks in achieving gender equality, as well as women's feelings of their contributions during the pandemic being underappreciated, some women began to question the personal cost they are bearing to meet the "golden standards" of gender equality in Iceland.

Among *strengths* contributing to female empowerment within the *social domain*, our participants highlighted a growing trend toward more equitable gender division of labor within households, noting that many men are increasingly engaged in domestic and childcare responsibilities—findings that align with the national data [64,70]. This shift appears to be largely driven by Iceland's longstanding national commitment to gender equality as well as policy reforms, particularly promoting dual paid parental leave. Echoing Metcalfe et al. [30], our interviews underscored that the implementation of "mandatory" paternity leave was instrumental in fostering shared caregiving responsibilities. Furthermore, our findings indicate that it was women who actively initiated the renegotiation of family power dynamics, and many succeeded in establishing a more balanced and equitable division of labor, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic, which also resonate with previous research by Carlson and Petts [71] and Hennekam and Shymko [72]. These efforts on redefining traditional roles were reported as more attainable in households without children. Importantly, the majority of our female participants with grown-up children described their domestic relationships as largely gender equitable.

There is notable convergence between our findings and the work of Erlingsdóttir [73] and Rúdólfsdóttir and Pétursdóttir [74], which highlight the emergence of pandemic-driven intergender solidarity in violence awareness campaigns through social media. These include grassroots platforms organized by women that exposed persistent structural inequalities, with the #MeToo movement as the most prominent example. Importantly, such campaigns sparked broader public dialogue in the Icelandic media and were recognized by our participants as a crucial first step toward addressing gender-based violence.

One of the most pressing pandemic-driven *constraints* to women's empowerment within the social domain during the pandemic was a global trend toward the re-traditionalization of gender roles, as discussed by Leap et al. [63] and Hank and Steinbach [75]. Our results demonstrate that Iceland was not an exception; despite strong policy efforts such as generous parental leave measures, heavily subsidized childcare, and institutional support aimed at facilitating women's return to the labor market, mothers, in practice, continue to stay at home for much longer than fathers. This pattern is also noted by Arnalds et al. [76] and Ingólfsdóttir and Gíslason [77], which reveals a persistent gendered division of caregiving responsibilities and parenting roles. In addition, our findings suggest that the number of hours invested in childcare responsibilities carries different meanings for men and women. As pointed out in our interviews, fathers' involvement often centers on leisure-oriented or "fun" activities, whereas the burden of routine, time-consuming tasks disproportionately falls on women. This gendered division of labor is also reflected by Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir [32] and a national survey [64], indicating that women perceive themselves as undertaking significantly more unpaid work than men.

In contrast to the findings of Flood [78], Gíslason and Einarsdóttir [79], Messner et al. [80], and Jóhannsdóttir and Gíslason [81], which highlight the importance of shedding light on the role of men in shaping and supporting the gender equality discourse, our study participants emphasized that particularly essential during the post-pandemic period, the initiation, (re)negotiation, and reinforcement of gender equality norms are predominantly seen as a female domain. According to participants' narratives, women are predominantly regarded as the primary drivers of change, while the role of men in this process is perceived as minimal or subordinate, if not entirely absent.

Our study results identified an acute conflict between the gender equality ideals and the expectations of intensive parenting, characterized as child-centered, emotionally taxing, time-consuming, labor-intensive, and financially demanding (as described by Hays [82], Faircloth [83,84], Novoa et al. [85]). Our analysis also aligns with the findings of Símonardóttir [86,87] and Auðardóttir [88], highlighting the emergence of the "inten-

sive mothering" model within the Icelandic context. This model places disproportionate demands on women, contributing to adverse effects on mental well-being [85,89], undermining work–life balance, and limiting opportunities for slower-paced, meaningful "quality time," as noted by Hjálmsdóttir and Rafnsdóttir [90], Craig and Brown [91], Fyhri and Hjorthol [92], and Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir [32].

Moreover, our study revealed unrealistically high societal gendered expectations surrounding women's, and particularly mothers', roles. In addition to exhibiting the neo-traditional phenomena of Sprakkar syndrome—a socially imposed strive to be 'Sprakkar'—high-achieving, "extraordinary women" that are "changing the world" (as portrayed by Reid [6]), Icelandic women also found themselves confined within 'Super Moms' complex, particularly in regard to personal appearance, motherhood, and household responsibilities. The evidence suggests that some of these demands intensified during the pandemic—echoing findings in other studies by Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir [32], Johnson and Pétursdóttir [93], Sigurðardóttir et al. [94], and Júlíusdóttir [95]. Although our qualitative data did not confirm earlier findings by Rúdólfsdóttir and Auðardóttir [74], Hjálmsdóttir and Rafnsdóttir [90], and Staub and Rafnsdóttir [96] regarding women's strong feelings of guilt, shame, and self-blame in association with perceived inadequacies in intensive mothering, it highlighted the growing presence of what Auðardóttir [88] describes as the "quest for perfection," embodied in the idealized role of what our participants called the 'Super Mom.' This ideal—often reinforced by women themselves through social media—not only imposes an increased mental burden, but also imposes standards rooted in traditional gender roles, ultimately constraining women's agency and their capacity for gender empowerment.

The perspectives shared in our interviews on 'aura of gender equality' in Iceland, which often inhibits open and meaningful public discussions, are consistent with the findings from the previous studies of Pétursdóttir [97] and Smidt, et al. [14]. While the COVID-19 pandemic opened space in the national media for conversations on domestic violence, awareness campaigns, the undervaluation of female-dominated sectors, and the burden of the "third shift" in the home, these discussions mostly faded in the post-pandemic period. Although Iceland's international image and national narratives of gender equality and Icelandic exceptionalism have a symbolic value, our study indicates that limitations in public discourse on practice-based solutions to persistent structural inequalities and everyday gendered disparities may negatively impact the long-term potential for women's empowerment.

## 5. Conclusions

The Icelandic government's longstanding commitment to upholding the highest standards of gender equality significantly shaped women's lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. Our findings suggest that the integration of gender equality principles into Iceland's legal and political frameworks, targeted policy initiatives, and broader social environment has played a crucial role in advancing women's empowerment—particularly within the personal and social domains of gender equality. However, the study also confirmed Smidt, et al.'s [14] points that a potential risk of stagnating progress in this area that arises from the prevailing 'aura of gender equality,' linked to the widespread belief that gender equality has largely been achieved in Iceland. This may limit space for critical reflection in public and academic discourse and make it more difficult to challenge everyday gender norms and practices. Based on interview narratives, throughout the crisis and its aftermath, women not only demonstrated an ability for self-empowerment through exercising their agency by seeking opportunities for personal and professional growth, and re-evaluating and translating their maternal parenting 'managerial skills' into competencies applicable to professional jobs, but also showed solution-oriented behavior, capacity to

critically reflect on gendered power relations at home, assert personal boundaries, and (re)negotiate increased household responsibilities. Importantly, women demonstrated capacity to collective power to reshape gendered social norms, including in traditional male domains, along with a willingness to continue and foster open and meaningful public discussion—the process toward shaping more equitable relationships within Icelandic society. At the same time, the pandemic crisis added layers of complexity to women's empowerment by revealing and intensifying both pre-existing persistent and emerging challenges that served as constraints to gender equality. These included the overwhelming burden of the "third shift," increased caregiving tasks and domestic workloads, burnout in the face of limited mental and emotional support resources, heightened levels of latent domestic violence, and entrenched patterns of gendered parenting and household responsibilities. In many families, traditional gender roles became quickly reinforced during the pandemic, requiring women's efforts to (re)establish more gender-equitable dynamics at home—particularly in households with children.

The study findings indicate that while all research participants expressed a strong commitment to advancing women's empowerment, at the same time, their lived experiences varied. Importantly, despite sharing similar perspectives on the strengths of and constraints to gender empowerment, the most pronounced differences emerged in relation to motherhood status. In particular, women involved in intensive parenting reported distinct experiences constraining their capacity for gender empowerment compared to their counterparts without children or those with adult children. Especially during the pandemic and recovery period, the contradicting ideals to strive for 'Sprakkar' (high-achieving, extraordinary women) and meet social expectations of being a 'Super Mom' involved in intensive mothering became more prevalent and difficult to cope with, ultimately resulting in a constraint toward women's empowerment in both the personal and social domains.

The study outcomes suggest that to advance women's empowerment and ensure broader long-term social sustainability, the further integration of a gender-responsive approach into policy development is crucial for the implementation of more comprehensive, nuanced, and locally adaptive gender equality measures that should take into account the specific social environments of smaller, more remote, and particularly rural communities. Such gender-responsive policies could be centered around capitalizing on strengths and reducing constraints to women's empowerment. Facilitating inclusive public platforms that amplify women's voices and foster open dialogue on pressing issues in gender equality is particularly vital during periods of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and recovery. Actions supporting women exercising their agency through personal and professional development would be especially effective. It is also imperative to ensure that all dimensions of personal health, including mental, social, emotional, and physical, are given equal priority to sustain individual holistic well-being. There are no one-size-fits-all gendered policies to prevent widening gender equality gaps, as factors such as age, gender identity, marital and motherhood status, and immigrant background significantly shape individuals' experiences and should be taken into consideration. Additionally, to inform more locally adaptive and intersectionality-informed policymaking, it is also essential to conduct longitudinal communities-oriented studies that trace gendered patterns of inequality, resilience, and empowerment across all domains of gender equality.

Limitations: This study is limited by its focus on women's experiences and does not present the full spectrum of perspectives necessary for a comprehensive understanding of gender equality. In particular, the lived experiences of men during the pandemic—across personal, social, and economic domains of gender equality—remain underexplored. Their views on gender roles, gender equality, the intensive parenting model, everyday challenges, and potential measures for improvement are essential to advancing a more holistic un-

derstanding of gender dynamics in times of crisis. Also, while this study is utilizing a gendered approach, it is designed to identify broad trends, along with highlighting intersecting markers of gender and motherhood, and therefore it does not disaggregate findings by multiple intersectional dimensions, such as women's immigration status, ethnicity or race, and socioeconomic class that significantly shape individual experiences. Although the incorporation of intersectional methodologies is critically important, this requires a more targeted research design. Addressing these gaps represents important directions for future research.

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