



Address
by the President of Iceland,
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson,
at The Imagine Forum: Women for Peace.
Veröld – House of Vigdís,
the University of Iceland,
10 October 2019

Dear Secretary General of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom,
Rector of the University of Iceland,
Dear guests.

I welcome you all to this peace forum, both my fellow citizens of Iceland and those who have come from afar.

We live in a world where violence is all too frequent, where peace is absent in too many places. We also live in a world of symbolic actions, in a world where people can hopefully be moved to act through powerful imagery or persuasive words. Last week, my wife Eliza and I launched an awareness campaign by Barnaheill, the Save the Children branch here in Iceland. “Stop the war on children”, that’s the slogan and the ambition. We did our part by putting our handprint on a wall in a mall. Will it do any good? Will this conference do any good? We Icelanders have a saying that words precede actions, but we must never be satisfied with symbolism alone; we must not be satisfied with declarations that – consciously or subconsciously – only serve to ease our own guilty conscience.

And of course, it matters most that the politicians, the policymakers, do their utmost to work for peace, not war; that they help those who need help, defend those who are defenceless, and aid not aggressors who need no aid but should rather be restrained. Furthermore, it can be of little use, and might pose more harm than good, to champion idealistic policies on peace and war without

having the political, popular or actual power to enforce them as needed. And, as a final point, it may just be so that we Icelanders are not the right persons to pontificate on conflicts in the world. We hold little or no experience in military matters; we do not have to make decisions on sending soldiers into battle.

Still, we can listen to voices of reason, and make clear our own reasoned stand. So, again, welcome to Iceland, dear guests from abroad. We will benefit from your knowledge and experience, and you will hear from Icelandic women who can certainly contribute to the debate and the good cause, regardless of our unarmed status and long distance from battlefields – or because of it.

Moreover, our history, ancient literature and cultural heritage may give us insights into women in war and peace. Join me briefly on a journey back to the first centuries of settlement here. More than 1100 years ago, people of Norse and Celtic roots sailed to this island and created a society, a society with a set of laws but without an executive body, and a society where women were mostly subjugated to male rule and domination.

The law of old forbade women to carry arms and we know of very few women slain by weapons. That was an advantage, to be sure. Furthermore, women of high standing in this clannish society often managed to influence events and conflicts. Historian Agnes Arnórsdóttir has written extensively on women and strife in these distant days. She has pointed out that, on the positive side, well-born women benefited from the fact that they could be of value to their chieftain husbands and sons. And these women usually lived longer than the men – “The men were always killing each other!” as Agnes stated.

How did women wield their authority? In our Sagas – marvellous tales of voyages and adventures, family feuds and violent strife – we find women who prevent bloody fights. They put garments on weapons, literally, thus preventing or stopping battle, and this expression is still used in Icelandic – *að bera klæði á vopnin*. Likewise, tales of the civil strife that ravaged Iceland in the thirteenth century contain many tales of women who endeavoured to mediate in male disputes, begging for mercy on all sides if needed.

Wars and conflicts hurt women and children. Yet, women, not to mention children, are rarely present in peace talks. Yet, we need people who are determined to stop the fighting, to cover the weapons with clothes. You are the experts, you know more about this than I do. I look forward to learning from you.

One caveat here, though, before we leave the world of the sagas: It must be added that in many tales we also find women who egged on their husbands and sons, in classic vendetta style. Garments were not only thrown on spears and axes; in *The Saga of Burnt Njal* – arguably the most epic of all the sagas –

strong-willed and vengeful women abound. One of them, Hildigunnur Starkaðardóttir, all but instructs her close cousin to seek revenge for her fallen husband by throwing his blood-stained robe over this relative of hers, who was then duty-bound to act, to continue the vicious cycle of slayings and revenge. Or take Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir, a strong woman indeed who realized her confines in a masculine world but also the powers she could employ: “We have done different deeds this morning,” she says to her husband who had just killed a dear friend of theirs, at her insistence: “I have spun much yarn,” Guðrún continues, “but you have slain Kjartan.”

All in all, the main lesson of our sagas is clear: Honour must be preserved, it is manly to fight and many of the women worthy of mention share such male attributes. These stories survived the centuries. They constitute a prominent part of our cultural heritage, our collective memory. Fortunately, however, we have learned to adapt their wisdom to the needs of the present and the future. In the middle of last century, Halldór Laxness, our Nobel laureate in literature, composed a parody of the reverence for feuds and fighting which permeates so many of the sagas. The blood brothers Þorgeir and Þormóður are central in the story and one cold evening, Þormóður asks his partner why he is still awake. “I can get no sleep”, Þorgeir replies, “for wondering where the men may be who are worthy that I should kill them.” And throughout his life of incessant assassinations and blind butchery, Þorgeir is mindful of his mother’s words in youth, that “Never should a true fighting-man bring on himself the shame of having chosen peace, when there was strife to be had,” and furthermore, that “a true fighting-man never spared women or children on a foray.”

Clearly, dear friends, it is the men who suffer most in this satire, as well as the outdated notion of brutal masculinity. But confrontational women get their share as well. Today, our image of strong, fighting women may be found elsewhere. I encourage you to get acquainted with our sagas but look at contemporary literature as well where women and peace are discussed, for instance the novels of Auður Ava Ólafsdóttir or the poetry of Gerður Kristný. And how about one movie as well? “Woman at war” by Benedikt Erlingsson tells the story of a woman who is determined to change the world for the better, but without putting people in harms away, and actually taking people out of harm’s way, for that matter.

That is a worthy task. I wish you all a successful forum.