

Speech by
First Lady Eliza Reid
at the SDG Frontier Finance Forum
United Nations Headquarters

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Dear guests,

As fate would have it, exactly one year ago today I was also undertaking a project to do with promoting women's rights – but in about as different circumstances from these luxurious surroundings as you could imagine.

On September 21, 2017, I visited the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, the world's second largest refugee camp. I was there at the invitation of UN Women Iceland, to meet women who worked at the UN Women sponsored “oases” in the camp.

On my visit, I bought a large hand-woven tapestry the women had made from the fabric scraps of clothing they sew for babies born in the camp – there are 80-100 babies born there every week. The tapestry features the scales of justice and a phrase in Arabic written along the top: *Equality is my right.*

The tapestry now hangs in the entrance hall of my home at the presidential residence in Iceland. You can see it here now in the photo that is displayed behind me.

This picture is part of the SDG Heroes: Women of Iceland series created by Ralph Reutimann, in which leading pioneer women from Iceland were asked to choose an object dear to us that also related to one of the Sustainable Development Goals. I chose this tapestry to match SDG number 5, gender equality, because we need women's full and active involvement to achieve the SDGs.

I live in Iceland and I'm honoured to be here today to talk about my adopted homeland and why my country has topped the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap index for the last nine years.

Over the past decades, we in Iceland have come far in the road to gender equality. I think it is not quixotic to say we can even glimpse a light at the end of the tunnel. And if we in Iceland can do it, I know we can do it elsewhere.

But gender equality does not happen of its own accord. It needs political will, solidarity, and a commitment to action from all of us.

Iceland's progress is not happenstance, but has been achieved through concerted effort and popular will. Back in 1975, as a means of protesting gendered wage inequalities, the women of Iceland famously went on strike. Predictably, the country shut down.

The strike garnered international attention, and paved the way for women to lead. In 1980, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir became the world's first democratically elected female head of state. By 2009, we had our first female prime minister, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir (incidentally also the world's first openly gay head of government), who presided over a cabinet composed equally of men and women.

Alongside trailblazing women, various Icelandic governments have taken steps to enshrine increased equality in law: Paid paternity leave for men, gender quotas for the boards of publically traded companies, and, most recently, a law to enforce the policy of equal pay at work.

I am proud to live in this country. I am proud to live in a place where my husband took several months off from his job as a professor to care for each of our four children while I grew my company. I'm proud to live in a country where the chair of the board of the first start-up where I worked used to breastfeed her baby at the board meetings, and a country where the women's national soccer team sells out the national stadium for vital games. I'm proud too that no matter how much we talk with pleasure of our achievements, every Icelander you meet will almost immediately emphasize that we have many challenges and much farther to go to reach our goals.

I am honoured to be able to share this pride with you today. And to share the potential that Iceland has, in our capacity as a global leader, and as laboratory for accelerating the process of gender equality. And gender equality, we all know, is essential for achieving the SDGs, which is why we are all here today.

In Iceland, we are accelerating the process of achieving gender parity. The current government has pledged to eliminate the gender pay gap by 2022. Iceland has a seat on the UN Human Rights Council and is a signatory to the Istanbul Convention on combating violence against women and domestic violence. After the parliamentary elections of 2016,

Iceland had the highest number of female representatives of any non-quota regulated parliament (though that number went down slightly in last year's elections).

In the private sector, we still have more work to do, though, and despite laws on equal representation on boards, women remain sorely underrepresented in senior management positions. We are far from perfect, and the #MeToo revolution held its share of uncomfortable revelations on our North Atlantic island just as much as anywhere else, reminding us that we cannot use positive statistics to cover up persistent problems that permeate our society.

But, we can show the world that when there is a consensus and agreement across *all* of society, when there is drive and passion and a belief that issues like gender parity are fundamental human rights, then we can do something, we can accelerate things so much faster -- including achieving the SDGs.

You might be thinking about now that gender parity, and achieving gender parity as a means to accelerate and accomplish the SDGs is too massive a goal. Its scope is simply too big to comprehend, too fraught with challenges to attempt. I am often awed by the sheer scope of what we need to do. And I think especially – perhaps in a typically “female” fashion - who am I to speak up for gender equality, when the proverbial podium from which I speak has been built for me because of something my husband has achieved?

But you know what? Here we are. We all have different histories that have brought us together today, but each of you has been invited here because of the impact you can have, the change you can impart to our world.

Earlier this year, 5th Element Group launched the Decade of Women, a worldwide solutions campaign created to celebrate, unite, and expedite sustained action to advance the gender equality revolution and fulfil SDG nr 5. Many people in Iceland, including me and Iceland's current prime minister, Katrín Jakobsdóttir, support this movement.

But let me repeat, gender equality does not come about of its own accord. It requires collective action. We are taking that action in Iceland and I hope leading by example and inspiring others to follow.

Your actions too can have an impact. What you choose to do here today and in the future can also help the vital acceleration of achieving gender parity. Each of us has a duty and responsibility to be proactive, not reactive. We are all citizens of this world. And after all, as I am reminded daily by my tapestry, Equality is our right.