

How Iceland's Herring Girls Helped Bring Equality to the Island Nation

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In 2021, Iceland nabbed the top spot on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report for the 12th year in a row. A measure of gender parity in politics, the economy, education, health and other key areas, the report praised Iceland's "strong performance" across the board, which enabled the island nation to close 89.2 percent of its gender gap—an increase over 2020. The United States, meanwhile, ranked 30th on the list, well ahead of Russia (81st) and China (107th) but behind much of Europe, New Zealand, and a handful of African and Latin American countries.

Iceland's high level of gender equality traces its roots to a remarkable period of rapid socioeconomic change. At the turn of the 20th century, herring fishing exploded in the North Atlantic, giving rise to boomtowns in northern Iceland—the equivalent of Gold Rush towns in North America. Seasonal influxes of fishermen fed roaring local economies and attracted herring girls, or women who came from across Iceland to take jobs gutting, cleaning and salting barrels of freshly caught fish. Known as *síldarstúlkur* in Icelandic, they found autonomy and opportunity in places like Siglufjörður, the island's largest herring hub.



Paid by the barrel, women who could cut, gut and salt quickly often earned more than the men working on the docks. Courtesy of the Herring Era Museum

Herring girls helped secure the gender equality and economic agency that Iceland is known for today, fighting for equal pay and labor rights. In addition to financial independence, the boom years brought women a taste of life outside of their hometowns and farmsteads. “[The period is] often referred to as the ‘herring adventure,’” says Anita Elefsen, director of Siglufjörður’s Herring Era Museum, “because it was. It’s just so very different from anything else in Iceland’s history.”

Though herring fishing had long been practiced in Iceland’s waters, the country’s herring era only began in force in 1903, when Norwegian fishing fleets showed up with massive drift nets capable of capturing huge caches of herring. The Norwegian fleets brought jobs, too, from staffing fishing boats to building docks to salting herring for sale in markets across the world.

Within a few years, Icelanders had not only mastered the same high-yield fishing techniques used by the Norwegians but also perfected their own. And the herring kept coming. Once-sleepy fjord towns began to fill up as more Icelandic men took to the sea, no longer as employees of the Norwegians but as captains and crew of locally owned boats. With the opening of Iceland’s first herring processing plant in Siglufjörður in 1911, the so-called herring boom was well underway.



Herring towns grew rapidly as salting stations, processing plants and warehouses sprung up along the ever-expanding docks. Courtesy of the Herring Era Museum

As the men who'd once processed the herring on the docks increasingly went out on the water, a labor gap emerged onshore. Who would be there to meet the boats when they came in and prepare the daily herring haul?

Enter the herring girls, who were referred to as "girls" no matter their age. They, too, came by the thousands from across Iceland, fulfilling a role so crucial that the industry couldn't have succeeded without them.

"The herring girls did the essential work of taking those fish straight from the boats and turning them into a product that could be stored and sold," says naturalist and journalist Jennifer Kingsley, a cultural specialist with Lindblad Expeditions, whose Icelandic cruises often stop at Siglufjörður. "It was such a simple act, but the scale was enormous, and it would be hard to overstate its importance."

Herring towns grew rapidly as salting stations, processing plants and warehouses sprung up along the ever-expanding docks. Home to some 1,200 residents today, Siglufjörður reached a population of more than 3,000 by the 1940s. When the fleet was in, 10,000 or more fishermen, workers and herring girls packed the streets and docks. By the time the boom ended in the 1960s, herring accounted for as much as 40 percent of Iceland's exports; at least 20 percent of the country's total exports were sourced in Siglufjörður.



Herring girls helped secure the gender equality and economic agency that Iceland is known for today, fighting for equal pay and labor rights. Courtesy of the Herring Era Museum

A look at Iceland's historic labor systems helps convey the tremendous significance of the herring era. Between 1490 and the late 1800s, poor, landless people in Iceland were subjected to *vistarband*, a law that obligated them to find work on farms and essentially live as indentured servants. Landowners were required to provide food and shelter, but only men were paid wages. Workers were not allowed to leave the farm without its owner's permission.

Vistarband was a form of serfdom that made it extremely difficult to break free from poverty and subsistence living, especially for women, who earned no income. Because landowners were the only ones permitted to have children, women farm workers were largely single, penniless and even more dependent on landowners than their male counterparts. In the late 19th century, about 25 percent of Iceland's population, or roughly 20,000 people, worked under the *vistarband* system.

For women who weren't indentured, life still revolved around domestic chores and was largely rural, as sheep-rearing was the largest industry on the island. "These women were used to being home alone all year round, cleaning, cooking and caring for their families," says Elefsen.



Siglufröður was Iceland's largest herring hub. Elizabeth Heath

The herring boom upended this norm, effectively ending the *vistarband* system by providing jobs and freedom for farm workers—first the men and soon after the women. Iceland's economy shifted over the course of a few decades, from agriculture-dependent to fueled by fisheries. For women and men alike, the herring boom brought unprecedented personal wealth. A herring girl who worked quickly might earn as much as \$10 a day—money that she could spend, save or send back home. Modest as it may seem, this accumulation of wealth helped eradicate exploitative labor practices of the past and drive Iceland's eventual independence from Denmark, which had long regarded the island as a sort of backward colonial outpost.

The legacy of the herring era, and especially of the herring girls, is vividly and tenderly recounted at the Herring Era Museum in Siglufröður. Iceland's largest maritime museum, it occupies five former fishery buildings, including a salting station that also served as a

women's dormitory, a fish meal and oil factory, and a reconstructed boathouse. Attractions include restored dormitories with original dresses, work boots and personal effects still in place; artifacts that speak to the global reach of Icelandic herring products; historic fishing boats; and heavy duty equipment used in fish processing.

Though the museum offers a comprehensive history of the herring years, it's the herring girls themselves who are the stars of the show. The museum hosts salting exhibitions on its front dock, where performers—including some former herring girls—demonstrate how freshly caught herring were gutted, salted and placed in barrels. Accordion music, singing, dancing and some lighthearted theatricality accompany the shows, capturing the lively spirit of the herring boom years.



A modern-day salting demonstration at the Herring Era Museum Elizabeth Heath

Herring girls' daily routines were much more grueling than suggested by these demonstrations. In the early boom years, women worked without aprons, gloves or waterproof boots in all weather conditions. "They were always outdoors," Elefsen says. "Some said the best weather was the worst, that standing in strong sunshine was worse than a cold or rainy day."

The museum director adds, “They had to be ready to start working whenever the ships arrived. There were no shifts or pre-scheduled hours.” As vessels approached, local boys ran or biked from house to house, knocking on windows to wake the women up.

Like many of her peers, former herring girl Birna Björnsdóttir, now 78, began working on the docks with her mother when she was a child. “I started on my seventh birthday,” she recalls. “From that day onward, I helped my mom with packing the barrels. By the age of 11, I had become an independent herring girl.” Björnsdóttir remembers the long hours as one of the most difficult parts of the job, with—quite literally—no rest for the weary at times. “When I had been working for over 12 hours and finally went home to rest, as soon as I fell asleep, there was a knock on the window and the next ship had arrived,” she says.



Former women's dormitory, now part of the Herring Era Museum Courtesy of the Herring Era Museum

According to Elefsen, this call to action “could happen at any time of day. There are even a few stories [about] boats coming in during a dance. The boys would go on stage, stop the band and call the herring girls to work.”

When storms or bad weather kept the ships in port, Siglufjörður became a hotbed of activity. “There were always fishermen, herring girls and other workers strolling around town,” says Björnsdóttir. During its peak years, especially in the 1920s and 1960s, the town boasted dozens of bars, several dance halls, a cinema that screened multiple films per day, candy and soda factories, bakeries, and butchers.

The former herring girls interviewed by Elefsen recall the period with a gleam in their eye: “My mother’s neighbor is in her 90s,” the museum director says, “and she’s told me that as a teenager, she remembers having to elbow her way down the main street, it was so crowded, and seeing couples kissing, people spilling out of bars, fistfights on the sidewalk.”



Herring girls unionized as early as the 1920s and held their first successful strike for higher wages in 1925. Courtesy of the Herring Era Museum

The women also reflect fondly on the fishermen, who’d roll into port for a few days before heading back to sea. “I asked one woman what she missed the most about those days,” adds Elefsen. “She said she’d love for it all to come back, and told me that the young men are just not as handsome today as they were back then.”

In 1968, the Arctic Ocean herring fishery collapsed as a direct result of overfishing. The once-plentiful Atlantic herring was on the verge of extinction, and Iceland’s economy took a sharp tumble. Siglufjörður and dozens of towns like it emptied out. Fish processing plants were abandoned, boats sat idle in harbors and docks no longer hosted lively gatherings. But even as many herring girls returned to domestic duties, their impact on Icelandic politics and society continued to resonate.

“The work market had developed enough that there were more opportunities for women,” Elefsen says, “and certainly more at the end of the herring adventure than at the beginning.”

Toward the beginning of the boom years, the herring girls had capitalized on their sudden and dramatic economic power. They knew the industry could not function without them. “The herring industry gave Icelandic women a much bigger sense of independence,” says Elefsen. Because they were such a critical part of the herring supply chain, women workers learned to use their voices and fight for their rights. They unionized as early as the 1920s, held their first successful strike for higher wages in 1925 and regularly negotiated for improved working conditions. Herring girls were also pioneers in pay equity. Paid by the barrel, women who could cut, gut and salt quickly often earned more than the men working on the docks. They made good money, and that money bought agency and independence from fathers, spouses and boyfriends.

Herring girls’ organizing efforts took place around the same time that women won suffrage in Iceland. The country’s first women’s rights organization formed in 1894 and collected signatures on voting rights petitions. By 1907, 11,000 women and men—more than 12 percent of the population—had signed on. In 1915, women over 40 were granted the right to vote, and in 1920, the country introduced suffrage for all citizens ages 18 and up.



In 1968, the Arctic Ocean herring fishery collapsed as a direct result of overfishing. Courtesy of the Herring Era Museum

Iceland, like every other nation in the world, has yet to close the gender pay gap. But it's come closer than many, achieving a 14 percent disparity between men's and women's incomes (the U.S.' wage gap is closer to 19 percent) and leading a concerted government effort to eliminate the pay gap. In 1975, 90 percent of women in the country went on strike, demanding—and winning—passage of a law that prohibited gender discrimination in the workplace. As of 2018, the law also requires Icelandic companies to demonstrate that they pay their male and female employees fairly.

Progressive laws in Iceland mandate gender equality lessons as part of school curriculums, offer some of the world's most generous parental leave policies, and require company boards and government councils to be comprised of at least 40 percent women. For nearly half of the past 50 years, Iceland has had a woman president or prime minister; in 2021, almost 50 percent of Iceland's elected representatives in parliament were women.

Today, observers often cite Iceland as a model of gender parity for other nations to follow. The historical arc of those achievements leads back to a period of rapid change in the country—to the salting stations of Siglufjörður and towns like it, and to the hard work of the herring girls.

“The herring girls were essential to this industry,” says Kingsley. “It couldn't have worked without them. And we are not used to thinking of women's labor in this way, especially not in a historical context.”

Special thanks to Anita Elefsen, director of the Herring Era Museum, for her help with interviews and translations.

Editor's Note, February 10, 2022: This article previously stated that herring girls who could cut, gut and salt quickly often earned more than the men working on fishing boats. Herring girls could earn more than men working on the docks but did not receive higher pay than those on fishing boats.

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