



Iceland

by Linda Rapp

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Throughout much of Iceland's history glbtq people were marginalized and unacknowledged by their society. Significant legal gains have been made in recent decades, but for people outside the capital conservative attitudes continue to make life difficult.

The first inhabitants of Iceland were Irish monks who arrived sometime before the beginning of the ninth century but abandoned their small colony upon the advent of Norse settlers around 850. Irish and Scottish slaves were among the population of these new settlements.

Life was hard for the early settlers. The interior of Iceland is covered by lava deposits from the island's two hundred volcanoes and by icefields. Only about a quarter of Iceland, mostly along its coastline, is habitable.

The Icelandic parliament, the Althing, was founded in 930, but Norway still exercised considerable power over the island's affairs. The Norwegian king Olaf I began a program of converting the Icelanders to Catholicism around the year 1000.

Norway finally took full control of Iceland in 1264, bringing an end to over two centuries of bloody rivalries among local chieftains. The high taxes levied by the Norwegians were a serious burden for the Icelanders.

The situation grew worse in 1380, when Norway, and with it Iceland, became part of the Danish kingdom. The Danes took little interest in Iceland, and a long period of decline ensued.

In the mid-sixteenth century Denmark imposed Lutheranism as the official national religion. Some 95 percent of contemporary Icelanders are Lutheran.

The nineteenth century saw a renewed interest in Icelandic culture and the beginnings of an independence movement. The country achieved limited home rule in 1874 and became a sovereign state in the Danish union in 1918. Not until 1944 did Iceland become a fully independent republic.

Early Attitudes toward Same-sex Sexual Behavior

Evidence of same-sex sexual behavior in early Iceland is scant. The sagas in the Old Norse language include no stories of gay or lesbian lovers, but they contain several episodes of retaliation by men accused of being a passive partner in intercourse, which was considered "unmanly" behavior and thus a threat to a man's reputation as a leader or warrior.



Top: Iceland and neighboring countries.
Center: Dykes on Bikes cruise through the Icelandic Pride Parade in Reykjavik, the nation's capital, in 2004.
Above: The Bis on Trikes contingent at the 2004 Icelandic Pride Parade.

Images of the Icelandic Pride Parade were created by Wikimedia Commons contributor Henna and appear under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike License.

With the coming of Christianity homosexual activities came to be regarded as sinful. To avoid the contempt of their neighbors gay men and lesbians tended to remain closeted and invisible in the society's public spaces.

In more recent times those with the means to do so might travel to more sophisticated places in Europe or North America or even emigrate, becoming "sexual political refugees."

Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness declared in 1925, "We now have in Reykjavik all of a sudden got everything which suits a cosmopolitan city, not only a university and a cinema, but also football and homosexuality." W. H. Auden, in his 1937 *Letters from Iceland*, wrote, however, that "homosexuality is said to be rare" in the country.

GLBTQ Organizing

At least in terms of the visibility of glbtq people, Auden's comment seems the more accurate reflection of Icelandic society. Not until 1978 did Iceland's first glbtq organization, Samtökin '78, come into existence. The founding members were all gay men because "no lesbian was found to take part in the beginning," but now women are active in the organization.

One of the first problems facing the members of Samtökin '78 went to the very issue of their identity: the Icelandic language had no words for "gay man" or "lesbian," and the term used for "homosexuality" actually means "sexual aberration." They adopted the words *hommi*, *lesbía*, and *samkynhneigð* (a compound of the lexemes for "same," "sex," and "orientation"). It took a decade of effort before Icelandic State Radio agreed to use these respectful terms.

Samtökin '78 now has almost four hundred members and receives financial support from both the national government and the city council of Reykjavik to carry on their important work in support of glbtq people and their rights.

Other glbtq organizations include FSS, a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender student association, and KMK, a lesbian group. FSS offers discussion forums as well as social activities for university students. KMK (*Konur með Konum* "Women with Women") is an organization that provides opportunities for lesbians, who are often not as visible publicly as gay men, to meet and socialize. Members are of all ages. The group's activities range from dances and poetry readings to camping and fishing trips and sports.

Political Successes and Challenges

Political success did not come immediately for the Icelandic glbtq rights movement. When Samtökin '78 pressed in 1985 for a parliamentary motion in the Althing protesting discrimination against gay men and lesbians, the measure failed to pass "due to the non-importance of the matter." Seven years later, however, a similar motion was put forward and passed by a unanimous vote.

Iceland's law now sets the same age of consent, fourteen, for both same-sex and opposite-sex couples.

Following the examples of Denmark (1989), Norway (1993), and Sweden (1995), Iceland passed a registered-partnership law for same-sex couples in 1996. On the day that it went into effect, June 27, two gay couples and one lesbian couple were married at the Reykjavik Registry Office. The ceremonies were followed by a reception at the Reykjavik City Theater, which President Vigdis Finnbogadóttir attended.

The registered-partnership law did not give same-sex couples all of the rights enjoyed by opposite-sex spouses. It allowed one partner to adopt the other's children, and in 2000 the law was revised to permit the adoption of the partner's stepchildren. However, it is still not permissible for same-sex couples to adopt

other children. This issue remains an important one for the Icelandic glbtq rights movement.

It is also of concern that while glbtq people in Reykjavik are able to live open lives and enjoy social opportunities, those in smaller towns often have a much more difficult existence.

Bergsson's *The Perfect Equal*

The difficulties that Icelandic glbtq people still feel in their quest for assimilation into their society are reflected in *The Perfect Equal* by Felix Bergsson, an actor as well as a playwright. He is one of the most popular children's entertainers in Iceland and does voice-overs for Disney films.

The Perfect Equal, which incorporates the poetry of Walt Whitman, tells the stories of five gay Icelandic men of varied ages and social circumstances who choose different strategies in life, including living openly, remaining closeted, and emigrating. The play has been translated into English and was performed in London in 2000 with Bergsson playing all five lead roles.

Iceland Today

Iceland is not a populous country. It has only about 320,000 inhabitants, approximately three fifths of whom live in Reykjavik. The capital is the only city with a real gay scene.

The Samtökin '78 Community Center provides social support for glbtq people and also has a café and library on the premises (the latter discreetly lending pornographic material--the sale of which is illegal in Iceland--from its "backroom" collection). Several clubs and bars are gay-friendly and draw a mixed but primarily gay male clientele. The MSC leather bar is the only public space exclusively for men.

Glbtq Icelanders have gone from being virtually invisible before 1978 to winning important political gains in the 1990s. Legal reform has in some cases been ahead of public opinion: the smaller and more remote communities are still not particularly comfortable places for glbtq people, and the official state church does not sanction same-sex marriage. Nevertheless, glbtq Icelanders have made significant progress in a relatively short period of time.

Lesbian Prime Minister

In 2008, Iceland was a principal victim of the international economic meltdown. With the collapse of banks and a steep rise in unemployment and inflation, the once-prosperous country settled into its biggest slump since independence.

In the wake of the economic collapse, the governing Independence Party lost the confidence of parliament. After the fall of the government in February 2009, a former flight attendant who has served in parliament since 1978, Johanna Sigurdardottir, was selected to serve as Interim Prime Minister, becoming her country's first female Prime Minister and perhaps the first open lesbian to lead a modern nation.

In May 2009, Sigurdardottir led her center-left coalition to a sweeping victory, winning 35 of the 63 seats in parliament. Her victory was seen as a rebuke of the pro-business Independence Party, which many blame for the economic catastrophe of 2008.

Sigurdardottir, who entered into a civil partnership with her longtime companion Jonina Leosdottir in 2002, is known as a champion of social causes and is widely respected as a tough but principled politician. Under her leadership, Iceland is likely to seek membership in the European Union.

Marriage Equality

On June 11, 2010, the Althing unanimously passed a law providing for marriage equality. The legislation, which met with no opposition, does not require the state church to sanction same-sex marriages, but does require that ministers be permitted to perform same-sex marriages at their own discretion.

Iceland thus became the ninth country to achieve marriage equality.

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