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**Sustainability and Connection to Place: Land Stewardship through Local Icelandic Women-Run Businesses**

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Sustainability and Connection to Place: Land Stewardship through Local Icelandic Women-Run Businesses

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SIT Iceland: Climate Change and the Arctic

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Abstract

Iceland is one of the leading countries in gender equality, but women are still underrepresented in the field of entrepreneurship. Women have unique approaches to land stewardship, and there is evidence that they are more likely than men to act sustainably. The purpose of this study is to explore the correlation between sustainability and connection to place in women-run, local businesses. I interviewed six women who run a wide range of businesses in the towns of Ísafjörður and Djúpivogur. From these interviews, I found that while the women did not necessarily think that running a business was more difficult as a woman, they felt they had a different experience than a man would in the same field. The six women also had connections to the place they live, and all were taking actions to prioritize sustainability in their work. They focused on place-based experiences and connection to local communities, and many had unique views on land ownership. These women demonstrate the importance of connection to place in sustainability and local businesses and ask us to challenge our own individual land ethic and views on stewardship.
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Introduction

Over the past three months, I have met many inspiring Icelandic women who run local businesses. Many of them have unique approaches to land management and sustainability, and I found that their views differ from what I was raised with. I was curious to know if their deep connection to the natural world around them influences their land ethic and sustainability efforts in their businesses and lives.

Objectives

With this research, I aim to gain further insight into the connection between local businesses in small communities and sustainability, specifically businesses owned by Icelandic women. My goal in studying women-owned businesses in Iceland was to examine a population that is overlooked and underrepresented in the realm of Icelandic entrepreneurship. Many of these women have unique approaches to stewardship and land management because of their gender and positionality in small communities, which guides the ways in which they operate their businesses. The objective of my research is to highlight the unique business practices and land ethics of these six women and explore how their connection to place can foster sustainable action.

Justification

Although Iceland is at the forefront of gender equality, women are not equally represented in the entrepreneurial and corporate realms, which raises a question about sexism
and bias (Armannsdottir et al., 2014; “World Economic Forum,” 2022). The impacts that female entrepreneurs have on local communities are not well known, which prompts the focus of this study on exclusively women-run businesses. Icelandic entrepreneurs outside of Reykjavik have been found to focus less on expansion and exportation and more on growth within local communities (Pettersson et al., 2012). In some cases, this unique business perspective also leads to more sustainable actions (Braun, 2010). Women have also been found to make more sustainable choices than men, and pro-environmental behaviors have been linked to having a connection to place (Braun, 2010; Kaltenborn & Williams, 2002). While there is an overwhelming amount of literature on each of these individual subjects, there is little research on their intersection. Together, these factors may suggest that local, women-run businesses have a different approach to sustainability and pro-environmental behaviors due to their connection to and relationship with the natural world.

Definitions

Sustainability

Sustainability is defined as “of, relating to, or being a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged” and “of or relating to a lifestyle involving the use of sustainable methods” (“Sustainability,” n.d.). While the participants did not always explicitly use the term “sustainable” to define their businesses, the qualities they discussed and the ideology of their operations may allow these businesses to be categorized as sustainable. These women sell handmade products made with local materials, provide place-based experiences that promote a deeper connection to land and work to cultivate connections with local communities.

Women

I use the term “woman” throughout this paper, which I acknowledge, as did some of the women I interviewed, can feel restrictive. This paper reinforces the gender binary by only using the terms “women” and “men,” but gender is a social construct, and gender identity is not binary, but a spectrum. Not only do we need to increase the representation of women in the entrepreneurial realm, but people of all marginalized genders, including (but not limited to) trans women, nonbinary people, and genderqueer people.
Land Stewardship

The term “land stewardship” is used in this paper to refer to a person’s protection, care of, and responsible use of the earth around them (“Stewardship Definitions,” 2022). While there is not a native indigenous population in Iceland and land stewardship is not unique to only indigenous people in the United States, I am conscious of the fact that much of my personal knowledge about land stewardship, connection to the natural world, and reciprocity is deeply rooted in indigenous teachings. I am also aware that indigenous peoples have had, and continue to have, acts of violence committed against them due to colonization. I am contributing to that harm as a white person living on stolen land. I give thanks to all who have educated me and all who will continue to do so in the future.

Connection to Place and Place Attachment

Place attachment is defined as “the person-to-place bonds that evolve through emotional connection, meaning, and understandings of a specific place and/or features of a place” (Wolf, 2014). Throughout this paper, I use the terms “connection to place” and “place attachment” interchangeably to refer to the relationship one forms with a specific place over time.

Land Ethic

The term land ethic originated with Aldo Leopold and refers to the set of ethics one uses to interact with the natural world. By this, he means the care and respect for the entire community (soils, waters, plants, animals, and the land), not just humans (“The Land Ethic,” 2020).

Context & Literature Review

Gender Equality and Feminism in Iceland

Iceland is regarded as a country that is high achieving in terms of gender equity. Iceland has ranked at the top of the Global Gender Gap Index for twelve years in a row, and the Icelandic government actively works towards gender equality by “working against pay discrimination and other forms of gender-based discrimination in the employment market, increasing education and awareness-raising on gender equality, changing traditional gender images and working against negative stereotypes regarding the roles of women and men” (“About Gender Equality,” n.d.; “World Economic Forum,” 2022). Iceland has a culture of strong women that dates back to pre-modern society—historically, Icelanders revered both Gods and Goddesses, and women were
priestesses, poets, and medicine doctors. Upon the introduction of Christianity, women’s rights were questioned, and Icelandic women had to fight for their right to vote and be represented in government. The Icelandic feminism movement reached a peak in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1974 God was referred to as “She” by the first woman inaugurated as a priest, and in 2012, the first female bishop of Iceland was inaugurated (“This is why Iceland ranks first for gender equality,” 2017). Icelandic feminism received the world stage several times throughout history, the first of which was the women’s strike in 1975. Women all across the country went on strike and protested in the streets, including women who were home taking care of homes and families (Dahlerup & Leyenaar, 2013). Icelandic President Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, the first nationally elected female president in the world in 1980, discussed the strike, saying, “It completely paralysed the country and opened the eyes of many men (Brewer, 2015).” Iceland also elected Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir as Iceland’s first female (and the world’s first openly lesbian) prime minister in 2009 (Dahlerup & Leyenaar, 2013). However, as discussed later, gender inequality still exists in Iceland—as of 2021, the unadjusted pay gap, meaning the average difference in salaries of women and men in Iceland, is 10.2% (“Unadjusted gender pay gap 10.2% in 2021,” 2022).

**Icelandic Parental Leave System**

A keystone of Iceland’s progressive gender policies is the parental leave system. It has had a large impact on closing the gender gap, which is defined as the difference between women and men in social, political, and economic spheres (“What is the gender pay gap (and why is it getting wider?” 2017). Currently, each parent of a child is entitled to up to six months of leave, and together, the parents have six weeks to divide between each other. The right to parental leave expires when the child is twenty-four months old, which is referred to by Icelanders as the “use it or lose it” policy (“Maternity and paternity leave in Iceland,” n.d.). The payment for those on parental leave is then 80% of the average total wages or salary as long as payments do not exceed ISK 600,000. The policy is slightly more complicated for those parents who are self-employed or employed part-time. The payments are then 80% of the average calculated payments on an insurance premium for those who are self-employed, and parents who are unemployed or employed part-time are entitled to a monthly allowance of ISK 80,34 (“Parental Leave,” n.d.).
The system is constantly evolving, but when a separate paternity leave was implemented in 1998 and increased from two weeks to three months in 2000, the policy began to have visible effects (Indriðason, 2022). Friða Rós Valdimarsdóttir, the former leader of the Icelandic Women’s Rights Association in the Kvenrétindafélag Íslands, says, “Over 80% of fathers already started to take leave then. It was incredible how fast this happened. This shows that if there is a will and firm steps are taken, big social changes are possible. Icelandic society changed very fast in that respect” (Indriðason, 2022). Since then, the parental leave system has continued to adapt and support single parents, self-employed parents, and parents who are current students. These changes benefit women running businesses, but taking parental leave while self-employed still proves challenging, especially if the pregnancy was unplanned (Indriðason, 2022).

Women in Business and Entrepreneurship in Iceland

Due to this progressive history of laws and regulations and strong activism on the part of Icelandic women, one would assume that this equality would translate to the realm of business and entrepreneurship. However, this assumption is false. A 2009 report from the Association of Business Women in Iceland found that in 2009 there were 14,951 organizations founded by men and only 3,125 by women (Armannsdottir et al., 2016). Women are much less likely to be represented on the board of directors than men are—in 2010, the Icelandic government passed a law stating that boards of directors had to include women. However, prior to this law, 71% of companies only had men on boards, and only 15% had both men and women (Armannsdottir et al., 2016; Reid, 2023). Women are also less likely to reach the status of senior positions in organizations (Armannsdottir et al., 2016). As of 2022, women only make up 13% of the CEOs in Iceland’s top eight hundred companies (Reid, 2023). The statistics were similarly low for self-employed women. In 2013, 16.2% of Icelandic men were self-employed compared to 8.2% of women (Armannsdottir et al., 2014). Iceland has the smallest gender gap in the world and extremely high numbers of women participating in the labor force (78.5% for women compared to 84.2% for men), but these statistics do not align with the number of women who are establishing companies and entering self-employment (Armannsdottir et al., 2016; “World Economic Forum,” 2022).

Eliza Reid, a journalist, editor, and First Lady of Iceland, wrote a book entitled Secrets of the Sprakkar, in which she interviews Icelandic women about gender equality in Iceland. She has a chapter entitled “Claiming the Corporate Purse Strings” and writes, “Men generally seem to be
in agreement with the concept and recognize overall that increased gender and ethnic diversity increases the bottom line. Vocal role models ensure the issue remains in the minds of decision makers. But the money—the companies on the stock exchange, investors such as powerful pension funds—remains firmly in the hands of men” (Reid, 2023, p.140). This is a common sentiment among women Reid interviewed. While men are not necessarily opposed to women holding positions of power in government and the corporate world, support is not always available, both monetarily and logistically (Reid, 2023).

Stereotypical gender roles are still ingrained in Icelandic society, despite work to combat these harmful narratives. Women still have more obligations in the domestic sphere than men do, and Júlíusdóttir et al. (2009) found the following:

Male managers are likelier than female managers to have spouses with part time jobs, working at home or from home. On the other hand, women in leadership positions have partners who usually work similar hours or even more than they do; they also tend to be single and childless more often than their male counterparts (Júlíusdóttir et al., 2009, p. 604).

There is a double standard: women are expected to both have successful careers and take care of a family, whereas the same is not asked of men of the same position. One of Eliza Reid's interviewees says:

I think that some of our other responsibilities, such as parenting, housekeeping and all the little things like birthday presents and doctor’s appointments, still weigh more on us women even if men are generally taking a more active role… very few of us have that luxury of a partner who just takes on the responsibility. If a man is the entrepreneur, it’s sort of expected that the woman picks up the slack. But if you’re a female entrepreneur, is it expected of your male partner? (Reid, 2023, p. 140).

A 2011 case study exploring a public policy initiative to support women’s entrepreneurship in Iceland also found differences in the types of businesses started by Icelandic women in Reykjavik compared to other areas of the country (Pettersson et al., 2012). Women running businesses outside of the capital are more likely to start businesses to help them remain in the area, whereas women who started businesses in Reykjavik were more likely to be focused on the expansion of their business and exportation of goods (Pettersson et al., 2012). This further justifies this study’s focus on businesses in smaller towns and the reasoning behind their work.
Women, Entrepreneurship, and Sustainability

The intersection of women and entrepreneurship is also important in the context of sustainability. A 2010 study found that women entrepreneurs are more engaged in environmental issues than male entrepreneurs (Braun, 2010). The authors used two surveys measuring environmental attitudes and behaviors, including attitudes towards the balance of nature, limits to growth, and human domination of nature. Braun writes, “Male entrepreneurs tended to look for bottom-line outcomes and competitive advantage, whereas women tended to lean towards broader ethical concerns in terms of benefiting the greater good” (Braun, 2010, p. 254). Gender differences may be an important factor in environmental action. Braun writes that male entrepreneurs may align more with the “finance-driven enviropreneur type” while female entrepreneurs are more likely to fit the “value-driven ethical maverick type, being more engaged in driving societal learning and change” (Braun, 2010; Taylor & Walley, 2004).

Eco-Gender Gap

Environmental care has also been coded as a feminine trait. The Guardian published an article in 2020 on the eco gender gap, a term referring to the difference in sustainable choices made by women and men. Femininity and “greenness” have become cognitively linked because the majority of eco-friendly products are marketed toward women (Brough et al., 2016; Hunt, 2020). This is likely because society still tasks women with more household and domestic duties than men. However, this branding has reinforced that sustainability and environmental action are the responsibility of women. Pro-environmental behaviors may also be associated with women because of societal gender stereotypes—empathy and caretaking are key components of a traditionally “feminine” role (Hunt, 2020). A 2019 study integrated gender role theory and sustainability, finding that men are much less likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviors labeled as more feminine (Swim et al., 2019). They feared being seen as gay or disrupting societally prescribed gender roles. These pro-environmental behaviors included carrying a reusable shopping bag, recycling, and purchasing sustainable foods (Swim et al., 2019).

Reconnection to the Land and Place Attachment

There has been a shift away from connection with the physical land we live on due to urbanization, but reconnection with nature is essential in order to prioritize sustainability efforts (Ives et al., 2018; Soga & Gaston, 2016). There have been many studies published on connection to nature and subsequent environmental care. Even seemingly small actions such as community
gardens, nature-based education, and tree planting connect local communities to nature: in 2013 Hawkes and Acott found that “growing food for personal consumption can simultaneously promote sustainability, enable experiences of nature, enhance knowledge of natural processes and ecosystem functions, and contribute to emotional attachment to a place” (Hawkes & Acott, 2013; Júlíusdóttir et al., 2018, p. 1394). Another study found that physical interactions with natural environments shape future environmental attitudes, leading researchers to encourage people to have more exposure to nature, especially children, in order to increase pro-environmental attitudes later in life (Rosa & Collado, 2019). Other studies discuss the idea of reciprocity, arguing that increased reciprocity in human/nature interactions is key to positive relationships between people and the land (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2018; Roszak et al., 1997).

Several studies show a relationship between pro-environmental intentions and behaviors and place attachment. Place theorists have found that people develop care for a place through continuous interaction with it, and environmental behaviorists have found that knowledge about a place, along with emotional connection, increases people’s “place-protective behaviors” (Kals et al., 1999; Kaltenborn & Williams, 2002; Pooley & O’Connor, 2000; Schultz, 2000; Tuan, 1977; Walker & Chapman, 2003). Kaltenborn’s 1998 study was one of the first to study the connection between place attachment and pro-environmental behavior (Kaltenborn, 1998). He divided a group of locals in the Norwegian Arctic into three groups based on the strength of their place attachment. He then gave them a list of scenarios that would affect their local environment and saw how the respondents reacted. He found that a stronger level of place attachment correlated with a “lower tolerance of increased tourism, a smaller likelihood of choosing a different location to recreate in when threatened with small amounts of shoreline oil pollution, and increased likelihood of getting involved with solutions to environmental problems” (Halpenny, 2010, p. 411; Kaltenborn, 1998). This study was the first of multiple to find a correlation between place attachment and pro-environmental behaviors.

CittaSlow Movement

CittaSlow is an international organization of many towns and municipalities focusing on local products and degrowth. While it did not originate in Iceland, Djúpivogur became the first town in Iceland to become part of the CittaSlow movement in 2013 (“CittaSlow,” n.d.). CittaSlow focuses on the “authenticity of products, good food based on the slow food philosophy, rich and fascinating local craft traditions, and the protection of the environment
together with the joy of slow and quiet living on a daily basis” (“CittaSlow,” n.d.). Towns that follow the CittaSlow movement prioritize environmental care and resist globalization by living quietly, in the moment, and by promoting humanity and respect (“CittaSlow Association,” 2016). While the official CittaSlow movement is relatively new to Djúpivogur, the land ethic promoting local and handmade products along with sustainability was present long before joining the movement in 2013 (“CittaSlow,” n.d.).

Methodology

I interviewed six women in the towns of Ísafjörður and Djúpivogur about sustainability, their connection to place, and gender biases in owning a business. The majority of the interviews took place in person, usually at the business of the person I was interviewing. Two interviews were conducted through video calls; one with Nanný Guðmundsdóttir from Borea Adventures and the other with Íris Birgisdóttir. However, a few weeks earlier, we visited Íris’ farm, so I was able to see her land and workspace in person at that time. Three of the women manage their businesses by themselves; one works with a female colleague, and two co-run their businesses with their husbands.

Prior to interviews, the women were given brief background information on the project and interview subject. The interviews ranged from twenty to forty-five minutes, depending on the direction our conversations went and the amount of time the individual had to talk. Interview topics included a history of the business, connection to place and community, sustainable practices, and experience as a woman in their profession; the discussion questions can be found in the appendix. The interviews were purposefully open-ended to leave room for participants to focus on what was important to them. After, I transcribed each interview, looking for themes of gender equality, sustainability, community, and connection to place.

Ethical Considerations

I received verbal consent from all participants prior to starting the interviews. I also received consent to audio record the interviews, to use quotes from the interviews in my paper, and to use their names. If participants had questions about the recording I also offered to send any quotes before including them in the paper. Anyone, including participants, program faculty, or students, is able to access any part of the research or final paper.
Participant Biographies

Sædis Ólöf Þórsdóttir grew up in Ísafjörður and runs two businesses there with her husband, a candle shop called Kertahúsið and a travel agency called Fantastic Fjords. Her goal is to make Kertahúsið a destination shop where people spend time learning about how candles are made. Lísbet Harðar Ólafardóttir grew up in Ísafjörður and now lives there full time. She runs the cafe, Heimabyggð, and also runs a guesthouse, works in construction, guides tours on Hornstrandir, teaches for SIT, and volunteers at the fire department in Ísafjörður. Íris Birgisdóttir grew up in Djúpivogur and now lives outside the town, working as an eider duck farmer. She also picks and dries Icelandic flowers to use to decorate for weddings, makes a children’s toy out of wood from her land, and is working on creating a sweetgrass spray. Vaida Bražiūnaitė is from Lithuania and now lives in Ísafjörður with her family. She and her colleague opened Hversdagssafn, or the Museum of Everyday Life, in 2016. Together, they manage, run, and create all the exhibitions. Satu Rämö is a Finnish author who now lives in Ísafjörður. She is in the process of writing the crime series Hildur. She also does freelance work, runs an active social media account and blog page, is the managing editor of a magazine, and guides tours in the summers. Nanný Guðmundsdóttir grew up in Ísafjörður and now runs a guiding company, Borea Adventures, there with her husband. She has previously run a cafe and worked as a kindergarten teacher.

Findings

Gender Equality and Business

The women I interviewed made clear to me that, for the most part, they perceive Iceland as gender equitable. They felt that even though small biases exist, they have all the same opportunities men do. They did not feel they were treated any differently due to their gender, especially in comparison to other countries. Lísbet brought up an important point about this comparison, though—she explained that people will sometimes use the fact that Iceland is at the top of the Global Gender Index to ignore injustices that do exist. She told me, “We are definitely better than 90% of the world, but I also don’t really like to think of us as a feminist paradise.”
That’s used as a weapon against us—when women are actually speaking up, we are constantly told that we should be grateful because Iceland is the best place in the world.”

While the six women interviewed all agreed that running a business was not necessarily more difficult as a woman, many said that they believe they have a different experience than a man would. Multiple women said they had been asked how their husband handles everything they do, whereas a man in their position would never be asked the same question.

Every woman I interviewed told me about at least one situation in which they were not taken as seriously or given the respect they believed a man would have been given had he been running the same business. Sædís confessed that sometimes her frustration from not being taken seriously reaches a point where she will send an email from her husband’s email account, and she gets a completely different response than when it was sent from hers. Before she makes a call or sends an email, she is careful to be aware of her tone and emotions because she knows she will get a different reaction than a man would in her position. Lísbet told me that it was much more difficult to get people to take her seriously in her industrial businesses as a woman, and Nanný expresses similar sentiments about some aspects of her guiding company. She told me, “I often need to say the same thing many times. But when my husband comes, I’m like, ‘I can’t do it; I can’t do this anymore. Can you please step in here for me?’ And he just needs to say it once.” Íris stated she felt she was not always a part of the conversations when she took over her farmland and had to work with the government of Djúpivogur. She tells me how people (typically older men) would contact her Dad if one of her fences broke, or something similar, instead of going straight to her.

In interviews, the parental leave system was met with overwhelming positivity from the two interviewees not born and raised in Iceland, but with more mixed feedback from those who were. Satu is a strong advocate of the system and said that when men are given the opportunity to stay home with children, they take it, which means that women aren’t losing opportunities by giving birth and taking leave. Vaida agreed and told me how she opened the Museum of Everyday Life when both she and her colleague had babies. Their husbands spent more time with the children, and now she believes it is equal, thanks to the parental leave system.

Lísbet, Íris, Sædís, and Nanný had some issues with the system but are overall in agreement about its benefits. One of the areas in which the parental leave system falls short, they stated, is in regard to women running their own businesses. Lísbet explained how it is hard to get
maternity leave as an entrepreneur. Íris expressed the same sentiment, saying, “If you’re your own employer, you have to make sure that you’ve been paying into the maternity leave fund so that you’ll get paid out. If you haven’t been doing that, you get the bare minimum, which is never going to hold you afloat. Ever.” Sædís said the minimum was not possible for their family, so she started working when her son was a month and a half old. They also had family help and an au pair until her son was old enough to attend kindergarten.

Multiple participants told me that some Icelandic families decide that women should be the ones to stay home with the children because men tend to have higher incomes than women. This is also true when the children are older: women are more likely to be the ones to stay home when children are sick. In the interviews, however, even the four women born in Iceland who had reservations about the parental leave system still praised it and made clear how much progress had been made, even within their lifetimes. In the words of Satu, “I always praise the parental leave system because it’s so fucking perfect. Well, it’s not perfect, but it’s really good.”

Four of the six women explicitly stated that starting a business was never something they had originally set out to do, and for the two others, it was heavily implied. For Sædís, her entrepreneurial interests come out of creativity. She told me, “I couldn’t sing a song or paint a picture, so in that sense, I didn’t find a purpose for my creativity anywhere. I really needed it; I need to be very creative constantly. In business, I can be very creative, and I think that is what has been my inspiration.” Lisbet explained that her desire to open the cafe came from a lack of a good coffeehouse in Ísafjörður. She said, “It was literally just a thought that took about five seconds. It was like, ‘I should just do it the way that I want it to be done.’ So I did. I’ve never thought that I wanted to own a cafe. I don’t think like that! I don’t really think about necessarily if I’m interested or not, except for if I’m absolutely not interested, then I know. But I could run a cafe.” Satu explained that her freelance work was always meant to be a placeholder until she found a job she was passionate about, but she discovered that she loves the independence running her own company offered. She told me, “I realized that when I have a job like this, I decide everything. I decide what I do, with whom I do it, what it costs, and how much money I make. And I can do it wherever I want.”

*Connection to Place and Land Stewardship*

Every woman I interviewed discussed having a strong physical and emotional connection to the land and place they live. All the women who grew up in Ísafjörður and Djúpivogur lived in
Reykjavik at some point, but they all came back to their communities to start their businesses and raise families. Íris discussed her time in Reykjavik and how detached she felt from the natural world while living in the city. She told me,

    I know [Reykjavík] is a tiny city, probably in your head, but for me, I felt disconnected from nature. But I didn’t realize at the time. But when I moved back home, and I bought the land, that’s when I felt like, ‘this is what makes me shine. This is myself; this is where I am supposed to be. And I know my friends in Reykjavík; they were where they were supposed to be. But I always felt like I was misplaced there. So when I moved back [to Djúpivogur], I was like, ‘What was I doing?’ I know I was getting my education, but still. I always felt like I was misplaced when I was there. This is where I am supposed to be.

Djúpivogur is a community that focuses on fostering an intentional relationship with the natural world. Being an eider duck farmer, Íris relies on the ducks for down, as well as the trees to make her children’s toy and the wildflowers to pick, dry, and decorate for events. Íris’ ethic surrounding land use comes from her family and her community—most of her family has roots in Southern Iceland, and they grew up very isolated. Without easily accessible stores, they had to fix things themselves. This mentality has been instilled in her and those around her and is a foundation of her relationship with the land today. It also is central to Djúpivogur, in the slow living ideology, CittaSlow. Íris believes that the answer to overconsumption and climate change could be found in CittaSlow, due to its emphasis on local communities and mindfulness to combat globalization and growth.

    Being a farmer, Íris views her role as a steward of the land rather than its owner. She said, I look at my job being a farmer; it’s more being the protector than the owner. There’s always this pressure, I feel, that land has to serve some kind of purpose for people. It can’t just be, for itself, in itself. And if it’s not a tourist attraction, we have to make a dam there, or… it always has to serve us in some way… even if it’s just a large pile of dirt, and it’s not beautiful and… it can’t just be. But I look at my job being a farmer; it’s more being the protector than the owner.

Íris pushed back against the notion that land is an entity that can be owned, arguing that as a farmer, the land is her responsibility to take care of, not hers to possess. Her connection to the land is also shown by the value she places on it intrinsically. Even if it is not serving a purpose specifically for humans, she still values it for no reason other than existing.
Lísbet also has a strong connection to the physical land of Ísafjörður and Hornstrandir, which has informed her views of land ownership. Her family has ties to Hornstrandir, and she spent parts of her childhood there. She told me,

In Hornstrandir, I can literally feel my bloodstream connect somehow. I think it’s probably because of my upbringing, and I can’t feel it anywhere else. My heart doesn’t really belong to any piece of the country except for there. It’s just a different… It's similar to holding someone’s hand that you like. It’s just a different kind of feeling that only happens here. It also happens sometimes; it was three days ago, it’s like when there is one certain smell in Ísafjörður, I can feel it here. Já, it’s like a salty smell that has to do with the ocean. Which is probably something that has to do with my core.

She struggled to explain this connection with words, showing how deeply ingrained her relationship is to the physical land of Hornstrandir. She also attributed it to her upbringing, showing how a connection to place early in life strengthens one’s relationship with the earth and the natural world. Like Íris, she rejected the idea of land ownership, telling me how it’s impossible for us to own something that owns itself. We can buy the right to take care of the land or own it economically. “But,” she said, “if you look at it from every perspective, the land owns you. You are really, really addicted to the land, somehow. You need the land to survive. But nature absolutely does not need you.” Lísbet said she thinks 99% of her family would agree and that her community shares the same sentiment.

Satu shared a similar perspective on land use, using berry picking as an example to explain how she sees land ownership in Iceland. She said, “When you go pick berries, you can do it wherever you like because it’s the freedom…you can walk outdoors, you can pick berries outdoors. No one owns those berries except for the ones who pick them up.” Satu made the point, though, that even though Ísafjörður is a small community, there are a wide variety of opinions represented. Although she does not agree, she admits some people who feel strongly that the land they own belongs to them and they are the only ones who can use it.

Vaida also has a physical connection to the land in Iceland since moving here but in a different way. She explained, “At first, I found it kind of harsh and unfriendly. The weather, you know, in the winter time… The darkness and the harsh winters and the weather threatening you. But I think the museum helps to use that, to turn it around.” Being an immigrant to Iceland,
Vaida has not spent as much time in Ísafjörður as Íris and Lísbet have, but she has developed that connection through her work at the museum. The current exhibits include interviews with local Icelandic people on perceptions surrounding the northern lights, jars containing smells from Ísafjörður, and six stories of daily lives in nature in the Westfjords. These exhibits highlight the importance of connection to nature in everyday life of those living in Ísafjörður.

**Place-Based Products and Experiences**

One recurring theme in every interview was the importance of products and experiences tied to place, specifically Ísafjörður or Djúpivogur. Sædis discussed how her dream was to make her candle shop a cultural experience where people could see firsthand her process of candle making. She said, “My goal, ultimately, with the candle shop is to make it a destination. Where you would come, you would see how candles are made, there would be a small shop there and maybe a tiny coffeehouse or something. More of a destination to visit than manufacturing.” Her candles are all modeled after local buildings in the Westfjords and Icelandic natural phenomena such as volcanoes and basalt columns. Her travel agency focuses specifically on local experiences in restaurants and around Ísafjörður. Sædis aims to make her candle shop a destination rather than a mass production of goods. The cost of manufacturing and storing the candles would be much cheaper in Reykjavík, but Sædis feels it is important for everything to be located in Ísafjörður. Encouraging people to see and understand the process behind candle making helps to tie her visitors to the physical land—people are able to understand where products come from and see the time and effort put into their creation. In this way, Sædis fosters a connection to the community and its surrounding natural places.

Satu also has a physical connection to the landscape in Ísafjörður, saying that she and her husband moved to Ísafjörður specifically for the easily accessible outdoors. The surroundings play a key role in her book series, *Hildur*. She told me,

> The mountains, they are just there, and you don’t see over it. And then you have the shadow of many months in the winter time, you don’t get sun at all, because of the freaky mountains. I love it, because somehow, nature is so huge, we are so small, and we just survive here. This huge contrast is giving an endless amount of possibilities in the crime writing because nature is playing a role in the difficult circumstances.

The physical landscape of Ísafjörður roots Satu’s writing and inspires creativity in her work, and the large role the setting plays in her novel shows her connection to the landscape around her.
Vaida told me how the whole premise of the Museum of Everyday Life is built around a connection to Ísafjarður and the history of the local community. When tourists kept poking around their houses summer after summer, she and her colleague realized that people were curious about the everyday life of the people living in Ísafjarður. Several of the current exhibits focus on a connection to the land and the local community, including jars that contain smells from households and the outdoors and a documentary interviewing local Icelandic people about their connection to the northern lights.

Nanný, the owner of Borea Adventures, runs tours in Ísafjarður and on Hornstrandir, providing the ultimate place-based experience. The majority of her tours are silent, allowing guests to practice mindfulness and connect with the natural world around them as they hike.

**Sustainability and Pro-Environmental Behaviors**

All the women I talked to have made efforts to run sustainable businesses, and many have future plans to get closer to their goals. In her travel agency, Sædis is working to highlight tours that visit companies or individuals that focus on sustainability. She currently has a tour to an area where people are making salt using geothermal heat to boil ocean water, as well as tours to places that use aquaponic construction. When thinking about her candle-making business, she discussed how candles themselves are very sustainable as a product. She told me, “Once you’ve looked at it on your shelf for a long time it’s like, ‘Alright, that’s enough; I have to make space for something else.’ Then you can use it as a candle.” Not only does the candle serve as a souvenir, but also as something that has a physical use.

Satu also aims to promote sustainability through her work, writing books and making apps for tourists. When people are researching where to go in the Westfjords, her resources give them information on which hotels have environmental certificates and the ethics of traveling through Icelandic nature as a tourist. She made it clear that although tourism greatly impacts the natural world, she does not want to prevent it entirely. She wants people to travel, and tourism creates jobs. She makes travel-related content in order to help people travel in the most environmentally and socially responsible way they can.

Lísbet also works towards sustainability at her café, Heimabyggð. She said that she thinks her business is the most sustainable in Ísafjarður, but they still have a lot of work to do. It is difficult for food industries to be sustainable in Iceland because everything has to be imported from abroad (even more so in Ísafjarður and Djúpivogur because products have to go through
Reykjavík first). However, Heimabyggð doesn’t use any plastic, and they recycle all their jars. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, they also organized a free clothing swap.

Íris is also trying to work towards having as little impact on the natural world as possible. She believes that eider farming is one of the most sustainable businesses, and the health of nature and making a better environment for the birds has always been her main goal. She dries all the flowers she picks naturally and aims to plant trees for the wooden toys she produces. She never produces in excess, and her goal is not to make a profit. She told me,

> If you think about greed and maximizing everything, that is the reason the world is where it is, with global warming. It comes from there because we got too greedy. To teach, to get that message on? I don’t know. I think… Maybe it is the connection to nature and the mindfulness that comes with it. When you realize that you don’t necessarily need more.

She believes that overconsumption is one of the main obstacles to preventing climate change. Íris tries not to buy anything she does not need and fixes things rather than buying them new.

As a farmer, Íris has a close connection to the land and is able to see the direct impact of her actions. She is aware that when she throws something away, there is no real “away.” She believes that having a connection to the place you live is important in wanting to protect it, and she told me a story about moving into her farmhouse just outside of Djúpivogur, which she is working on building currently. She said,

> I was always planning on, ‘Okay, when I move there, I’m going to make sure I don’t bring any toxic chemicals, all my cleaning supplies are going to be environmentally friendly, all of that.’ Because I was so aware that everything would go down the sink or in the air and would end up in the ocean right in front of my farm, in the little cove. And then I stopped all of a sudden and was like, ‘Am I a hypocrite?’ It’s such a wrong way of thinking. Why, because I don’t care about the ocean that is right here in front of my town?

When Íris could see her physical impact on the natural world, she felt the urge to act more sustainably. She knows it is the same ocean, but it’s much easier to avoid thinking about the environmental impact when one can not physically see its effects and does not have a connection to the place.
Discussion

Every woman I interviewed felt they have equal access to the same opportunities as men and that gender equality is prioritized where they live. While all of them have experienced bias while running their businesses, the women all felt that their gender did not limit them in their work. Many of them also expressed that they feel Iceland has continued to improve in gender equality over their lifetimes, although there is still progress to be made. Some attributed this improvement to the progressive parental leave system, which is constantly evolving and changing to support more parents and families of all kinds. From these responses, we can see that Iceland deserves to be held up as a model for gender equality, especially its parental leave system. Even in the entrepreneurial realm, which is overwhelmingly male-dominated, Icelandic women who run businesses still, for the most part, feel supported and do not believe that their gender holds them back in their work.

All the women I interviewed did not initially set out to start a business (or multiple), yet ended up in that position nonetheless. This could be a coincidence, but there are also several factors to which it could be attributed. Íris discussed how she’s seen a rise in women starting small businesses and wonders if it may have to do with stereotypical women’s jobs paying less. She said, “But maybe because I live in the countryside, that is because all of the well-paying jobs are usually men’s jobs. Or that has been… maybe now it’s changing, I don’t know. As a woman living in the countryside, most of the jobs available to you, if we’re still talking about jobs being gendered, they’re not really well paying. Maybe that drives us to do our own stuff.” Íris raises an interesting theory—perhaps women in more rural areas in Iceland are actually more likely to start their own businesses or projects due to a lack of support and pay in traditionally gendered jobs. Instead, they use what is available to them within their own scope of knowledge, relying on their creativity, connection to their communities, and to the natural world.

It is also important to note that every woman who was originally from Iceland told me that they had chosen to leave Ísafjörður or Djúpivogur at some point in their life to live in Reykjavík. For some, the reason for leaving was education; for others, it was family commitments. Satu, who is not originally from Iceland, had not planned to stay in Ísafjörður, but once she and her family arrived, they became immersed in the community and never left. It is significant that all these women decided to leave their respective towns and communities, but what is even more meaningful is their choice to return, especially years later, to run businesses
and raise families. Each individual’s choice to return demonstrates their place attachment and how impactful it is to grow up with close connections to the land and local communities.

Every woman interviewed had a strong physical or emotional connection to the land around them, especially those who were born and raised in Ísafjörður or Djúpivogur. Each person was also taking steps to make their business more sustainable, and multiple have future goals for sustainable actions. Lísbet and Íris, the women most passionate about land stewardship rather than land ownership, also seem to be the women taking the biggest steps to make their businesses more sustainable. These two women were the only ones to discuss interactions with nature early in life. This affirms previous research that has found that early exposure to nature shapes future environmental attitudes (Rosa & Collado, 2019). This then raises the question: do women with a strong place-based connection to the land then run their businesses more sustainably? Based on these interviews, I would argue that there is strong evidence that having a place-based connection to the natural world does increase pro-environmental behaviors of these women running local businesses. Because these women have connections to their community and to the physical land in Ísafjörður or Djúpivogur, they are able to see the direct impacts they have on their natural environment. They feel empathy for the land around them and act to protect it.

**Limitations and Future Research**

There are several limitations to this research. First, I only interviewed six women, which is a relatively small sample size. If there had been more participants, I might have gotten a wider array of responses to interview questions. In addition, all the participants except one are from Ísafjörður. This complicates the findings because it is possible that the correlation between connection to place and sustainability may be location specific. Without research on place attachment and sustainable actions in other Icelandic communities, we cannot assume that other areas have the same strength of place attachment as residents in Ísafjörður do.

In order to address the limitations of this study, potential future research may include conducting similar interviews with a larger sample size and participants from towns across Iceland to see if results differ. The land ethics of these women could also be expanded to larger businesses in order to see the effect of sustainable actions taken. Although the aim of this research was not to compare the differences in sustainable actions by businesses run by women
compared to businesses run by men, a survey with quantitative data could also be performed in order to explore the correlation between sustainable action and gender, specifically in small businesses. If one gender is found to act more sustainably in entrepreneurship than others, it would be important to research why this is the case. It may also be valuable to study the reasons why members of each gender decide to start businesses and how the size of the business correlates with its connection to place.

Conclusions

Despite being the country with the least gender discrimination in the world, Iceland’s women continue to be an underrepresented group in the corporate realm (Armannsdottir et al., 2014; “World Economic Forum,” 2022). Women enter the labor force at the same rate as men but are still not equally represented on boards of directors or in positions of authority. They are also much less likely to be self-employed (Armannsdottir et al., 2016; Reid, 2022). However, women are actually more likely than men to engage in pro-environmental behaviors (Swim et al., 2019). There are also links between connection to place and pro-environmental attitudes later in life (Rosa & Collado, 2019). Combining these components, research on sustainable practices in women-run, local businesses and connection to place offers a new perspective on all four areas of study.

From these interviews, we can conclude that these women experience a powerful connection to place that fuels their decisions to make their businesses sustainable. Their land ethic is an uncommon perspective in the entrepreneurial realm—they prioritize products and experiences rooted in the area and the community around them. They are not primarily focused on profit and growth, and run small businesses with an ethos of sustainability and stewardship. If we can all become better stewards of the land and act with care and consideration for our own local natural environments, we may actually be able to have a positive impact on our own communities, our businesses, and our world.
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Appendix A

Interview Questions

- What is your business? How did it start? Where do you get your inspiration from?
- What connection do you have to the place you live?
- Did you grow up here? How long has your family lived here? If not, how did you end up here?
- What connection do you have to your community?
- How does the physical land you live on impact your work (if it does)?
- In what ways is your business sustainable?
- Do you think there is a difference between running a business as a man vs. a woman in Iceland? Were you able to both have a family and a career (if it applies to you)?
- Iceland is seen as one of the most progressive countries when it comes to gender equity—do you think this is accurate?
- Do you think the government adequately supports women wanting to start their own businesses?