For many of us, the Arctic tends to conjure images of an icy wasteland and harsh living conditions in remote communities. Too often the fact that people live in the region is overlooked while climate change, potential economic development, scientific research and more recently (resumed) military activity attracts significant attention. While all of this plays a large role in the fate and development of the region, it is important to remember that the Arctic is in fact the home of millions and is a region of cultural diversity and vibrancy, although admittedly not without its challenges.

Adaptation to change and the resilience of Arctic populations historically has been celebrated throughout, but the rate of change witnessed today will increasingly contribute to pressures on communities – environmental, infrastructural, economic, social and cultural – requiring perhaps new ways of coping and adapting.

It is important to remember that change in the Arctic is not uniform and that geographical and cultural differences will always require an understanding of context, providing also the opportunity to learn from each other. The need for sustainable development is however shared by all Arctic communities, indigenous and non-indigenous alike. Sustainable development requires multi-stakeholder cooperation and diversity – including in terms of gender balance - in leadership and policy-making processes at local, national and international levels.

Gender Equality in the Arctic (GEA) is an Arctic Council project initiated by Iceland in 2013. At the time, gender issues had not featured very prominently in the work of the Arctic Council since the Arctic Council co-organised a conference on gender equality and women in the Arctic entitled Taking Wing, held in Inari in Finland a decade earlier. The Arctic Council has published two important reports where gender is addressed: The Arctic Human Development Report I (ADHR I) published in 2004 included a special chapter on gender and the Arctic Human Development Report II (AHDR II) mainstreamed gender into each chapter.

GEA is a circumpolar collaborative project focusing on gender equality and diversity in the Arctic. It’s objective is to highlight the importance of recognition and appreciation of diversity in terms of discourses, gender, indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, governance, education, economies, social realities, sustainability and balanced participation in leadership and decision-making both in the public and private sectors.

GEA has enjoyed strong support from the start and the majority of the participants in the first phase of the project have kept the torch burning. For information about the project partners, sponsors and other collaborators please visit the project website: https://arcticgenderequality.network/

GEA is comprised of three phases. Phase I included the international conference ‘Gender Equality in the Arctic: Current Realities, Future Challenges’ held in Akureyri, Iceland, October 2014. The event was well-received and brought together indigenous and non-indigenous policy makers, scientists and business people from the eight Arctic States. The conference proceedings were published in Feb-
ruary 2015, and are available online (https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/handle/11374/409), as are recordings of each presentation (https://www.arcticiceland.is/is/recordings).

Following up on one of the conference conclusions, Iceland proposed a follow-up project in 2016, where the aim was to create an Arctic Gender Equality network of stakeholders from all walks of life.

In the GEA phase II follow-up project, the focus has been twofold: On the one hand, on creating a website [https://arcticgenderequality.network/] and a facebook group [https://www.facebook.com/groups/Gender.Equality.Arctic/?ref=bookmarks], where scientists, policy makers and other interested parties can find relevant material and connect to potential collaborators. On the other hand, raising the level of visibility of gender issues through organization of and participation in sessions on Gender Equality in the Arctic at various Arctic events: the Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavik, Iceland, 2017 and 2018; the Arctic Circle Forum in Tórshavn, Faroe Islands, 2018; and not least at the UArctic Congress in Oulu and Helsinki Finland, 2018. These have included themes such as Contemporary Issues of Gender in the Arctic (Arctic Circle, October 2017, Reykjavik); a breakout session on Gender and Mobility: Integrating Realities into Policy and a panel on Gender Equality in the Arctic: Challenges and Situated Policies (Arctic Circle Forum, Faroe Islands, May 2018); sessions on Networking on Gender Equality in the Arctic Region: Round Table, Gender Equality and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and Health and Gender Equality. Changing quality of life: Women, Men and Health (September 2018 Helsinki, Finland); and

Arctic Leadership: Gender and Diversity in Politics, Science and Industry (Arctic Circle, October 2018, Iceland).

Recently a call for material was distributed to networks, appealing to colleagues to contribute interesting material related to issues of gender and diversity in the Arctic region. This could include reports, information on networks and projects, articles, books or videos for publishing on the project website. All those with pertinent information are encouraged to contact Ms. Embla Eir Oddsdóttir, Director, Icelandic Arctic Cooperation Network at embla@arcticiceland.is.

Phase II of the GEA project will see its conclusion in spring of 2019 whereas GEA phase III is set to begin shortly thereafter. Phase III will be a two-year project where networking and dissemination will continue to play an important part, while also including an initiative conducting a comprehensive analysis. Project participants look forward to continued cooperation with new and old partners.