
Women, Entrepreneurship, and Diplomacy:

An Interview with Sigríður Snævarr

SIGRÍÐUR SNÆVARR

FLETCHER FORUM: *After the banking crisis hit Iceland, you organized a major job retraining effort to aid with massive unemployment. What brought you to focus on job retraining? How did you start this program, and what did you learn?*

SIGRÍÐUR SNÆVARR: I started preparing the job retraining program immediately after that dramatic day, October 6, when the banking crisis hit us. Nothing in my life could really have prepared me, or anyone else, for that day nor its consequences. To take unemployment as an example of the drastic changes which resulted from the crisis, Iceland went from an annual unemployment rate of 1 percent in 2008 to that of 8.2 percent in February 2009. Society was in no way prepared for this. People felt stigmatized for having lost their jobs and had no hope for finding a new job. I was amongst many who worked day and night to devise ways to train people in this situation, racing against time as we saw the unemployment numbers rising daily.

Sigríður Snævarr holds a diploma in Italian from Perugia University, a B.Sc. in Economic International Relations from the London School of Economics, and a M.A. from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy where she studied on a Fulbright Scholarship. She has served as Iceland's Ambassador to Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Namibia, South Africa, Mozambique, France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal, amongst others. In 2008 Snævarr started a private company, "Nýttu kraftinn," with a mission of using a diplomatic method to train and empower job seekers in the wake of the Icelandic banking crisis. In 2013 she published a book reflecting on her job retraining efforts.

What brought me to focus on job retraining was my experience as an ambassador in Sweden and Finland in the early nineties. Both countries saw their economies contract suddenly and reached a two-digit unemployment rate in a short time. I knew the cost of that high unemployment; in Finland it resulted in what the Finns call their “lost generation.” We could not lose a generation in Iceland, with a population of only 320,000.

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Thinking back on how I made this jump from diplomacy to job retraining, I can see now how I used both my life long interest in public speaking and management and, of course, my diplomatic training, which taught me how to be proactive and react quickly to situations. In diplomacy we always point to the strengths of the country we represent as we seek opportunities for our country. That is what you do when you apply for a job—you put your best foot forward, strengthen your capacities, and look for new opportunities for yourself.

Another aspect of diplomacy is story-telling, and I used to tell the first groups of trainees the story of an Icelandic seaman who saved himself from drowning by swimming for over six hours in the middle of the night. Not only was he strong and physically fit, but he took every right step along the way; every decision he made enhanced his mental and physical strength. What was most important for the seaman was to take the matter seriously and use many methods to reach land. In this case, land was new employment.

What did I learn? The first thing I learned was that after celebrating my thirtieth anniversary as a diplomat, and thus a government employee, it was perfectly possible to start a company, find a business partner, María Björk Óskarsdóttir, and write a book, which was published last year, containing all the valuable knowledge and experience we had collected along the way. I also learned that diplomacy and foreign policy begins and ends with domestic politics and that there are diplomatic tasks everywhere you look for them, including at home. Since my career involved moving between countries for so long, reinventing myself along the way, adjusting to any new situation was easy. Working with 1100 persons since 2008, and giving over fifty public lectures on a wide range of topics, has been a colorful part of my life, and my dream for the future is now to use all of this to train diplomats.

Despite the sad and emotionally taxing beginning, the last few years have been a wonderful time in my life, as I see people really blossom and eventually take charge of their lives and decide whether to seek employment, further their studies, or start their own companies.

FLETCHER FORUM: *You were the first woman appointed ambassador to the Icelandic Foreign Service. What was it like to be the first?*

SNÆVARR: Strange as it may seem, I never thought much about being the first woman, be it as a diplomat appointed directly after university or the first Icelandic woman ambassador. I was lucky that there were outstanding women who belonged to the administrative part of the diplomatic service. They had amazing knowledge and skills that I benefited from, so I certainly wasn't the only woman at work in the embassies. Still, I can see in old letters to my parents that I often describe

myself as the only woman around the table in various contexts of work where diplomats gathered together. I hope that I never let this strange situation affect my work. Shortly after I was confirmed, another young woman graduate joined the Service. We are close friends and having each other and being able to compare experiences and consult each other on the appropriate reaction to situations was a source of enormous strength for us both. Mostly we served in different countries, but at one point I was the ambassador in Paris and she was the Deputy Secretary

General of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). We enjoyed every minute of it and both benefited enormously from finally working in the same city!

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But, you know, when things happen, they happen fast and Iceland is of course known for woman leadership today. In 1980, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir became the first democratically elected woman president of the Icelandic Republic, and today we have women in leadership in Iceland in every field.

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As for Icelandic female ambassadors, they now occupy key positions. When I think today of the fact that our two ambassadors in Brussels, the permanent representative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the soon to be ambassador to Belgium and the European Union are women, mothers of three and four children respectively, I cannot help but feel pride in the progress we have made since that time.

FLETCHER FORUM: *What are lessons you would pass on to the future generation of diplomats? Are there any imperatives that you think need specific attention?*

SNÆVARR: The first lesson that I would like to pass on is that of taking lessons from others with a grain of salt. I have seen diplomats heed advice, for example regarding a smart career move, only to find out that the times had changed and the good advice turned into a trap. There are so many different jobs within the same diplomatic service, so a good lesson to learn regarding one position may not be useful for another.

From my own experience and the pitfalls into which I fell, what first comes to mind is from the beginning of my career, something of possible interest for new graduates. Looking back I can see that it took me too long to adjust from the world of academia to that of diplomacy. It was

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..... hard to let go of the analytical work which I had prepared for and to find that place which is not academia and not journalism, but diplomacy. I had entered a new world and needed to adjust to new challenges, fit in with a new team, acquire new types of people skills, and humbly face the practical tasks at hand. Eventually, I learned my lesson, but it took me too long to let go

and I learned to be more conscious when adjusting from one country or project to the next, to let go and give up, even to let go of what I did best and most wanted to repeat!

Little by little, I realized that even as I got better, I still was far from being able to control all of the aspects that make work worthwhile and rewarding for me. Therefore I developed something I called “my lifeline,” which I will pass on to you as my most important lesson learned. My lifeline was not something I needed to do for my loved ones, or for my own health. It was a project of my choosing, which depended on me alone. Once it was a short thesis I wrote over a very long time, at another time I

did nothing in my spare time but read in French. Over a period of three years most of my spare time went into a management training program. My lifeline thus included, and still includes, different types of activity, but it always gives me purpose, joy, and many friends. It acts as a shield against whatever is going on at work and in life. When leaving the office after a hard day of work, there is always this feeling of having something to fall back on at home.

Nothing could make me happier than to sit down and think about how to share my life with the future generation of diplomats. Diplomacy is my passion and to see it renewed and renewable, on the verge yet again to be

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given to another generation, fills me with hope for the future. Far from being outdated, there are constantly new fields and challenges, and I have not even mentioned globalization!

There are many more lessons to share, but you asked about any imperatives that I thought needed special attention. To pick out one concern, I will choose the question of whether you see diplomacy as an occupation of a life-time, as it always was for me, or if you see it as a temporary job of a few years while preparing for another career or path in life. Whatever you do, I feel strongly that you are the sole judge in this crucial matter and that no lessons can be learned from others.

Having chosen to stay myself, and see others leave and choose other paths, I ask you to distinguish between *quitting* and *giving up*; these are separate concepts. In my generation, a diplomatic career was for life and many who quit the diplomatic service came to regret it, not finding a suitable alternative. Yours is a different world in this respect. A few years as a diplomat is good for your CV and future prospects, so embrace the opportunity and give it your all. You will gain a lot of universally applicable skills and valuable life experiences. Stay, if the combination of the nature of the work and the gypsy life-style of moving between countries agrees with you and your family. Never stay just because of your promotion prospects, despite being unhappy. Should you start having doubts about either the work itself or the whole life-style of moving every few years, then quit as fast as you can. A diplomatic career is never important enough to make a child unhappy or put a spouse into misery. As I experienced with my job retraining program, the diplomatic world is not so closed any more. We

are knowledge workers, and we can today start a new career anywhere and use our diplomatic skills, our knowledge, and our fantastic ability to build new networks.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Do you think women and men approach diplomacy differently? Have you encountered a difference in style, tactics, or strategy?*

SNÆVARR: I have really tried hard to answer this question so central for this issue of the *Fletcher Forum*. In doing so, I am reflecting on this for the first time and my answer is unscientific and speculative. My short answer is that when I observe my own Foreign Service, I see such radical changes in every way in the recruitment and advancement of women that it goes beyond even my dreams and ambitions.

Do I see a radical difference between the young men and the young women in diplomacy today? Let me take a practical example: imagine that I was selecting the right personalities on a team for a particular task. For this example I will posit that we were going to examine Iceland's transatlantic relationship, and that this was a brainstorming team rather than people selected necessarily on the basis of their position. Today we would need to integrate multiple issues into a coherent policy suggestion. Would the women on the team be more likely to pose new questions? Are they less afraid to let go of the past? Would they redefine the concept we were working with? Would they have a more extensive network to consult? Or would their contribution depend on their personality and their formative experience?

How would I select the team? I would of course have both men and women there. The group of women that I would have to choose from is still smaller than that of the men, but I would find all sorts of personalities and strengths in both groups. I would start by thinking up what needed to be done and then look for the right person for every part. I would definitely look for different styles, tactics, and strategy in the members of my team. I would not hesitate to say to myself, smilingly while selecting, that I needed a women's touch for this part, or for another part I was likely to find a man with that particular expertise. I would be seeking diversity rather than aiming to select the team quick or with a certain outcome of consensus. I would welcome a different way of thinking; diverse views and ideas.

Some decades ago we undertook such an exercise of looking into the transatlantic relationship. I was the only woman in the group, and was only asked to give information connected to my then-posting as an information officer. I cannot remember being involved in any discussion on the issue, only handing out my paper and receiving papers from the others. Those were the times, and it simply is a whole new world today.

I admit that my answer is speculative and I am undoubtedly blinded by optimism. My own style of embracing future-oriented projects within diplomacy is based on my dream to keep diplomacy alive and relevant. I have no idea if this is part of my femininity or a result of my training. I just feel strongly that we must reinvent some thinking around the much proven core of classical diplomacy.

I want to see women diplomats as bold, convincing, and with clear goals, leaving behind the homogeneity of the past, recreating diplomacy. We lost too many talented women, and a few men, with so much to give because they did not fit a predetermined mold for diplomats.

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Was there, or is there, a typical woman diplomat, recognizable in style, tactics and strategy? There was a sort of self-selection of women diplomats who first made it to the top of previously male-only hierarchies in the first generations. Those who survived through the ranks appeared to me as very courageous, highly motivated leaders who were not afraid to really test their boundaries. A few of them became key players in diplomacy, and highly respected, though I must admit to having been a little bit afraid of some of them. Perhaps you could call it a protective shield they had to put up to survive and meet their high ambitions. I remember many a strong personality—bold, committed and self-reliant—networking strategically for the purposes of reaching their goals. What about that description as a good basis for young woman diplomats to stand on? *f*