

## EUROPE

# A Man Among Female Leaders: 'The Risk of Mansplaining Is Very High'

By KATRIN BENNHOLD DEC. 2, 2017

REYKJAVIK, Iceland — Xavier Prats Monné could not say what exactly he expected from Iceland, this tiny gender utopia where selling pornography has been banned since 1869 and the world's first openly lesbian prime minister was elected in 2009. But it was no shock that the driver who picked him up from the airport was a woman.

Until she offered to help with his luggage.

"What? No, no, no, no, no," Mr. Prats Monné replied, alarmed, and hastily picked up his suitcase himself. "No, no, no. Thank you."

Mr. Prats Monné, 61, a quick-witted Spaniard with a ready laugh, runs the 900-employee department of health and food safety for the European Commission, the executive branch of the European Union. He routinely mingles with Europe

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But this past week, he was in Iceland to speak at what was billed as the largest ever gathering of female political leaders, sponsored by a nonprofit devoted to increasing their numbers. Less than one-quarter of parliamentary seats worldwide are held by women. Among heads of state, 7 percent are female.

The summit meeting drew more than 300 current and former female lawmakers, prime ministers and presidents. At a time when scandals of sexual misconduct in the workplace are roiling society, Mr. Prats Monné was one of a few men on the roster of speakers.

His topic: maternal health.

“When you speak to an audience of women about motherhood and you are a man, the risk of mansplaining is very high,” he admitted.

I had sought out Mr. Prats Monné because I was curious: At an international conference of politicians, how does a man feel when he is in the minority? What could it tell us about gender equality?

An anthropologist by training, Mr. Prats Monné was intrigued. “I deal with primates every day,” he said of his male colleagues. “Maybe this will be different?”

He agreed to let me shadow him for 24 hours.

At 5.30 p.m., that female driver, a 27-year-old named Erla, was taking us to our first event: a reception hosted by Iceland’s former president Vigdis Finnbogadóttir, 87, whose cult status is such that all Icelanders refer to her by her first name. Vigdis means war goddess in Old Norse. In 1980, she became the country’s (and the world’s) first directly elected female president — and was a single mother to boot.

Erla told us that gender roles were not that clearly defined in Iceland: Her father, she said, was “a housewife” for a few

years when she was a teenager. Her mother, a nurse, was the breadwinner.

Indeed, the World Economic Forum has ranked Iceland first for gender equality nine years in a row, in an index that examines educational opportunities, life expectancy, pay equity and other factors. Eight out of 10 Icelandic women work, the highest female employment rate in the world.

The pay gap between men and women is due to close here in 2022 — the World Economic Forum says that globally, it will take 217 years.

It was starting to snow. The landscape outside was barren, almost moonlike. “You need to be pretty tough to survive in this climate, man and woman,” Mr. Prats Monné observed.

He had noticed the sturdy shoes women wore on the plane flight over.

“Iceland is also egalitarian in appearance,” he said.

When we arrived at the reception, at a newly built language center dedicated to Vigdis, two dozen women were spilling out of a shuttle bus and into the revolving doors. In his suit and tie amid a sea of colorful dresses and blazers and head scarves, Mr. Prats Monné turned some heads.

The ground floor was packed with women and a sprinkling of men, most of them security guards and journalists. Mr. Prats Monné, a regular at conferences, said the room not only looked different, but sounded different, too: “It’s so quiet,” he said.

Next to us, two women — a center-left lawmaker from Europe and a conservative one from the Middle East — met for the first time. They hugged and kissed. Mr. Prats Monné mostly shook hands.

“It is a cohesive group that has its own signs and body language,” he said, his inner anthropologist emerging. “They

acknowledge each other as being from the same tribe. I'm not from their tribe — although I do feel very welcome.”

At the buffet, we bumped into Silvana Koch-Mehrin, the founder of Women Political Leaders, the network hosting the summit. Nibbling on a strawberry, Mr. Prats Monné observed: “There really aren't many people who look like me.”

“Welcome to my world,” Ms. Koch-Mehrin replied.

She set up the network in 2013, because as a female member of the European Parliament she had been painfully conscious of her minority status. “The permanent fashion trial,” she sighed, referring to public scrutiny of what prominent women wear.

Mr. Prats Monné has never faced such issues himself. But he empathizes. “There is no such thing as a glass ceiling,” he said at one point, “just a big fat layer of men.” Of his 35 peers as directorate heads in the European Commission, he noted, only one in five are women.

When he was a student in Madrid 40 years ago, Mr. Prats Monné read the “The Subjection of Women” by John Stuart Mill and was deeply affected by it.

I asked if he is a feminist.

“Of course,” he said. “The opposite of feminism is ignorance.”

Mr. Prats Monné wanted to know more about the building, a striking modernistic structure, and someone pointed him toward a gentleman in a gray suit.

“The building manager or something,” Mr. Prats Monné explained after they spoke.

When I told him later that the man turned out to be the speaker of the Icelandic Parliament, Mr. Prats Monné laughed.

“In this setting, when you see a man, you assume he’s the janitor.”

The next morning, we took seats near a delegation of Jordanian lawmakers and a Greek diplomat. At the next table were the presidents of Lithuania, Malta, Estonia and Croatia. Two tables over were the former prime ministers of Canada and New Zealand. All women.

On the sidelines were half a dozen young men in suits: aides to the delegates, I was told. One held his boss’s white coat.

On the agenda: panels on peacekeeping, rape as a weapon of war, (the lack of) women in technology, maternal mortality, sexual harassment.

Yet the first three speakers turned out to be men: Iceland’s president, foreign minister and prime minister (who, later in the week, would be replaced by a woman).

Each spoke about how gender equality is their fight, too. They mentioned a 1975 strike, when Iceland’s women walked out of factories and kitchens for a day, demanding equal pay, and the subsequent founding of a feminist party. Since then, Iceland, an island of 330,000, has established shared parental leave, banned strip clubs, instituted gender quotas in boardrooms and passed same-sex marriage with a unanimous vote.

Today’s global #MeToo movement is claimed by men as much as by women here.

“We men no longer give our tacit approval to sexual harassment,” the foreign minister said. The president concurred: “We have had enough.”

Iceland is living its own #MeToo moment, after the country’s youngest female lawmaker, Aslaug Sigurbjörnsdottir, 27, went on television last week to share her experience: of

rumors that she had slept her way up, of a rival candidate putting his hand on her thigh every time he addressed her in front of a room full of students.

An hour after the program aired, Ragnar Öundurson, a banker, had reposted one of her Facebook pictures. "I want you to think about the kind of image you project," he had written.

A day later you could buy T-shirts featuring a troll with the caption "Don't be like Ragnar," and by now 500 people have signed a petition supporting Ms. Sigurbjörnsdottir.

Watching the gathering from Mr. Prats Monné's perspective only underscored its significance, amplifying the subtle signals, sounds, interactions and exchanges that characterized a room filled with powerful women.

When his turn came to speak, it was on a panel with four women. As a health expert, he said he is used to speaking to female audiences, "but usually I'm on a panel of men talking to a female audience."

"Institutionalized mansplaining," he calls it.

Afterward, I asked one of the other panelists if the organizers had invited him onto the panel because they were mindful of diversity.

"No," she assured me, "he is definitely not the token man."

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