

When the State Owes You Happiness

The AIDS Crisis in Iceland 1983–1994 and the Making of
New and Reformed Homosexual Citizens

ABSTRACT

Despite a recent interest in Icelandic LGBTQ+ history, the impact of the AIDS crisis remains an underexplored field. This article focuses on the AIDS crisis in Iceland from the early 1980s to the publication of a state report on the status of homosexuals in Iceland in 1994. Taking as its point of departure the concept of intimate citizenship and critical theories of happiness, this article explores the links between HIV and AIDS and legal reform and asks how representations of AIDS influenced the construction of an (ideal) homosexual citizen in Iceland. By analyzing governmental sources such as resolutions, parliamentary discussions, and reports, as well as media representations of the first Icelandic man to come forward as an HIV-positive gay man, this article argues that the AIDS crisis played a critical role in forcing Icelandic authorities to develop new ways of approaching the homosexual community.

Keywords: AIDS, homosexuality, intimate citizenship, happiness, LGBT politics, Iceland

DESPITE A RECENT research interest in Icelandic LGBTQ+ history, the impact of the AIDS crisis remains an underexplored field. The article explores the links between HIV/AIDS and legal reform and asks how representations of AIDS influenced the construction of an (ideal)

homosexual citizen in Iceland. It thereby underlines how the history of HIV and AIDS is deeply intertwined with legal reform and social change. As noted by scholars of citizenship, ideas of modern citizenship emerge and evolve on multiple platforms (Plummer 2003; Weeks 1998; Richardson 2012). In this article, I select two different social arenas to demonstrate how representations of AIDS influenced constructions of homosexual citizenship. On one hand, I examine governmental sources such as speeches, resolutions, and reports to demonstrate how ideas of homosexuality and an ideal homosexual citizen evolved within Parliament and its institutions, thus symbolizing the introduction of homosexuality as a formally integrated part of the nation. On the other hand, I analyze the case of Sævar Guðnason (1949–1989), the first Icelandic person to publicly come forward as an HIV-positive gay man. After his disclosure, Sævar became a spokesperson for AIDS prevention and education. He appeared in numerous interviews, but this article focuses on his most extensive and elaborate interview, published in the magazine *Heimsmynd* (i.e., World View), in late 1987.

By bringing together those two different bodies of sources and drawing on theories regarding the interconnections of citizenship, intimacy, and happiness, I seek to analyze how different discourses, constructed in different social arenas, influenced one another, thereby changing the social construction of AIDS and creating a framework for discussing and constructing ideas of homosexual citizenship.

First, I discuss how homosexuality was framed within the Icelandic term *kynvilla* (i.e., gender incorrectness) and how the arrival of HIV/AIDS challenged the *kynvilla* framework and initiated new ways of approaching homosexuality. I then turn to stories of intimacy and examine how intimate stories promoted the idea of homosexual citizenship. Finally, I turn to the concept of happiness as a political imperative that creates a moral hierarchy of norms and values.

This article draws on a range of international historical scholarship on HIV/AIDS that conceptualizes HIV/AIDS not only as a global health threat but also as a crisis of representation and knowledge production (see, for example, Treichler 1999, 11; Nebeling Petersen et al. 2023, 9).

Theoretical underpinnings

Constructions of citizenship, which lie at the core of the article, will be approached from two different angles. First, I draw on Ken Plummer's notion of intimate citizenship, which focuses on the modern transformation of the divide between the private and the public. It describes how private decisions and practices have become intertwined with public institutions and state policies in late modern societies, thus blurring the boundaries between the private and the public (Plummer 1995; Plummer 2003, x). By redrawing or shifting these boundaries, Plummer argues, multiple new possibilities for intimate lives have been created. The private and the public are therefore not static formations but dynamic ones that carry political weight (Plummer 2003, 70; Plummer 1995).

Here, the concept of intimate citizenship is used to explore the changing political importance of intimacy. One of the key concepts of intimate citizenship is the function of stories and storytelling. According to Plummer, intimate stories play a crucial role in the transformation of citizenship, as stories of intimacy have become increasingly influential. Such stories have enabled people on the margins of society to claim a new type of citizenship based on the importance of intimacy. Sexual storytelling has thus created a space for well-being, security, and emotional freedom that people have begun to claim as an unquestionable part of their citizenship rights. Storytelling has therefore become a political practice that has secured the legitimacy of intimacy within the political arena (Plummer 2003, 1995). Stories such as Sævar's therefore carry political weight.

The article's second intellectual strand follows the notion of people on the margins of citizenship. In her influential work *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed explores how the moral imperative of happiness is attached to the unequal conditionality of citizenship. Through critical readings of imperial history, national belonging, and nationhood, Ahmed describes happiness as a moral imperative that directs people toward certain choices while rejecting others. Thus, by attaching happiness to certain statuses, behaviors, norms, and values, happiness becomes a promise offered to those who live in the "right" way. As such,

Ahmed claims that happiness can be used as a “technology of citizenship” (in Foucauldian terms) to make national ideals, norms, and values attractive to those who remain at the boundaries of citizenship. Ahmed describes this relationship as follows:

What is at stake in citizenship is the differentiation between those who are and who are not yet citizens (what I call “would-be citizens”), where the “not yet” is offered as promise of what is to come. If the promise of citizenship is offered as a promise of happiness, then you have to demonstrate that you are a worthy recipient of its promise. (Ahmed 2010, 133)

By aligning the political act of sexual storytelling, such as the story of Sævar, with Ahmed’s theory of the function of happiness, this article analyzes how the promise of happiness was used as a tool to ensure that the reconstruction of citizenship on the grounds of intimacy would align with, rather than challenge, existing structures of citizenship.

How to have an epidemic in Icelandic

As a small nation on the margins of Europe, anxieties concerning loss of identity and nationhood were a common theme in twentieth-century Icelandic history (Hálfðanarson 2001). Ideas of foreign influence as corrupting the pure, rural community of Iceland have taken many forms. Sexuality was one of the central features in the construction of foreign corruption, whether in relation to the dangers of promiscuity or the possibility of homosexuality spreading in Iceland during the early to mid-twentieth century (Hafsteinsdóttir 2017; Vilhjálmsson 2019; Benediktsdóttir 2022). Discourses surrounding homosexuality developed in parallel with the question of whether homosexuality was a foreign vice or an unavoidable part of modern Icelandic society. It is therefore of crucial historical importance to distinguish between discourses and ideas of homosexuality as a foreign phenomenon and homosexuality as a part of Icelandic society (Benediktsdóttir 2022, 199).

One of the central components of maintaining homosexuality as an alien vice was its framing as *kynvilla*. *Kynvilla* is a multifaceted con-

cept that invites several interpretations. Its straightforward translation is gender (Icel. *kyn*) incorrectness, error, or misorientation (Icel. *villa*), thus meaning being wrong in one's gender; however, *kyn* can also mean kind, as in mankind, thus implying being disoriented from one's species. *Kynvilla* was a dominant framework for homosexuality in Iceland from the 1920s until the advent of AIDS. It is a unique construction for same-sex love, eroticism, and sex that does not coincide with Western concepts such as homosexuality, sodomy, or inversion. Originally a term for incorrect grammatical gender, *kynvilla* came to be used to describe scandals such as the Eulenburg affair in the early twentieth century and became a default term for same-sex love in medical texts, literature, and media. One of the main agendas of the first generation of Icelandic lesbian and gay activists, following the establishment of Samtökin '78 (the Icelandic national queer organization, then the national lesbian and gay organization; hereafter S78) in 1978, was to eradicate the use of *kynvilla* and replace it with words such as *hommi* (i.e., gay man), *lesbía* (i.e., lesbian), and later *samkynhneigð* (i.e., homosexuality) – in other words, to introduce the concept of modern homosexuality (Samtökin '78; City Archive of Reykjavík).

When news about a mysterious new disease targeting gay men began to circulate in Icelandic media in early 1983, all major media outlets, except for the leftist newspaper *Þjóðviljinn*, chose to frame AIDS primarily within the context of *kynvilla*. Through this framing, prejudice and sensationalist coverage flourished. The pandemic was constructed as a disease of foreign decadence, bound to corrupt metropolitan centers such as New York or San Francisco and driven by sexual deviants (Björnsson 2008; Jónsson 2020; *Svona fólk*, Plágan 2019). The underlying otherness of *kynvilla* was also reflected in coverage of other groups targeted by the disease, such as IV drug users and Haitians in the United States. In the few instances in which AIDS was discussed in relation to hemophiliacs, *kynvilla* was largely avoided. The framing of AIDS as a symptom of *kynvilla* thus fed into and intensified punitive fantasies and what Simon Watney has called the “spectacle of AIDS,” in which the homosexual male body becomes a symbol of death and decay, deprived

of humanity and any possibility for sympathetic identification (Watney 1987, 80–83).

As the course of the disease developed, the image of AIDS, both internationally and domestically, changed from being confined to promiscuous gay men to being understood as targeting the entire population (Slagstad 2021; Treichler 1999, 55). On April 28, 1985, Iceland's largest newspaper, *Morgunblaðið*, published an infamous headline that read "All mankind in danger," signaling that AIDS was no longer a disease bound to *kynvilla* but instead posed a threat to all humankind. Through the reconstruction of HIV/AIDS as a disease that could affect anyone, *kynvilla* faded as a public default framework for understanding homosexuality, as its associations with deviancy and error were inadequate to describe a disease that could target the entire population¹ (Hafsteinsdóttir, forthcoming). When the Ministry of Health disclosed the first cases of AIDS in Iceland in July 1985, it could no longer be denied that AIDS was an unavoidable part of Icelandic society (Björnsson 2008, 48–49). The recontextualization of HIV/AIDS as a disease not confined to *kynvilla* but capable of affecting the entire population thus invited a reconstruction of homosexuality.

Into the halls of Parliament

The framework of *kynvilla* as a legal, yet deviant and sinful, concept hampered nuanced political discussions of homosexuality. Moreover, efforts by lesbian and gay activists to challenge the hegemony of *kynvilla* were met with heavy resistance (Björnsson 2008). However, despite little visible progress, public protests and international pressure from organizations such as the Nordic Council of Homosexuals, helped establish a notion of modern homosexuality (as opposed to *kynvilla*) as a political matter rather than a private one (JGK 1983).

In November 1985, four months after the first case of AIDS in Iceland had been publicly disclosed, a small group of MPs from four parties across the political spectrum proposed a parliamentary resolution calling for the eradication of discrimination against homosexuals. Homosexual conduct had been made legal in the Penal Code of 1940; however,

the code was adapted from Danish law and the decriminalization of same-sex conduct received little attention from Icelandic MPs (Thorvaldssdóttir 2007, 127–128). The parliamentary resolution introduced in 1985 called on the center-right government to appoint a committee to investigate the situation of homosexuals in Iceland and to propose legislative amendments and reforms based on its findings (*Alþingistiðindi* 1985–1986, 138A). The presenter of the resolution was Kristín Kvaran, an MP from the Alliance of Social Democrats, a splinter party of the more established Social Democratic Party. Kristín’s rationale for the resolution was twofold. First, it encouraged MPs to follow resolutions issued by the European Council in 1981 and the Nordic Council in 1984, urging governments to eradicate discrimination against homosexuals, and framed the Icelandic legislature as backward and falling behind in the pursuit of equality, since such work was already underway in other Nordic countries. Second, Kristín emphasized participation rights and individual self-worth, arguing that discrimination was a source of misfortune and that emotional well-being was essential to a life worth living:

Discrimination breaks down one’s self-respect. [...] For the individual to be respected and have a sense of self-respect, which is necessary for leading a prosperous life, one needs to receive the support of one’s community. (*Alþingistiðindi* 1985 B-1791)

Kristín’s arguments mirrored ideas about the construction of a modern Icelandic homosexual identity introduced by lesbian and gay activists in the early 1980s. The manifesto of the first magazine published by S78, *Úr felum* (i.e., Out of hiding) read: “Out of hiding is our motto. By coming out of hiding, we, as individuals as well as a social group, can reach our goals, which are full membership and participation in society” (Blaðhópurinn 1982). Although the audience of *Úr felum* was mainly the lesbian and gay community, the journal aimed to educate heterosexuals and gays and lesbians alike about how homosexual lives could be filled with happiness and fulfillment if gays and lesbians could

safely come out of the closet functioning as a moral manual on how to be a modern, Icelandic homosexual. The idea of the importance of coming out and the relationship between living openly as homosexuals and citizenship rights was further elaborated in an article by Þorvaldur Kristinnsson in *Úr felum* 1983, in which he examined the connections between intimate life and public life:

We who love our own gender have been robbed of the right to speak about our innermost desires with our fellow human beings, and therefore we cannot seek the strength we need to live and work among other people in human society. This is the essence of the struggles of lesbians and gays. (Kristinnsson 1983, 4)

Both Þorvaldur and the parliamentarian Kristín Kvaran sought to combine intimacy with welfare and social rights, albeit from different angles. The gay activist Þorvaldur advocated openness as a precondition for obtaining rights, while the politician Kristín Kvaran saw rights as a necessity for coming out. By highlighting notions of citizenship as having both private and public dimensions, she sought to create a space for discussion of the meaning of citizenship as a multidimensional concept. Kristín's conceptualization echoed feminist notions of citizenship as a dynamic relationship between status and a practice (Lister 1997). At the same time, advocacy for rights from above, so to speak, entailed expanding the role of Parliament to become an active participant taking responsibility for intimate rights. Such a development, Plummer explains, is a core element of intimate citizenship, in which a dynamic relationship of mutual influence between private decisions and public institutions begins to take shape (Plummer 2003, x).

By taking steps, albeit from different directions, toward deconstructing the boundaries between private and public lives, gay activists such as Þorvaldur and MPs such as Kristín sought to carve out a hybrid zone between private claims to pleasure and public calls for rights, which, according to Jeffrey Weeks, constitutes the fateful juncture of the modern sexual citizen (Weeks 1998; see also Plummer 2003). Although they

did not address happiness explicitly, both Þorvaldur and Kristín emphasized a notion of what was missing. Through notions of lack or unfulfillment, they hinted at what Ahmed describes happiness as a form of waiting – a social promise constituted through postponement (Ahmed 2010, 33; see also Ahmed 2004). By addressing what is not there (but should be), Þorvaldur and Kristín laid the foundation for what Ahmed calls the forward motion of happiness, a line to follow in order to achieve fulfillment and eventually arrive at a happy life.

Although the group behind the resolution consisted of members from more established parties, the resolution was the initiative of individual party members, driven forward by Kristín Kvaran, and there was little political will within Parliament to advance it further. The proposal was immediately referred to Parliament's general committee without further discussion and never resurfaced for a second round of debate – a fate common to issues deemed unpopular or unnecessary (*Alþingistíðindi* 1985A, 138; Stefánsson & Eydal 2004).

How to approach HIV/AIDS: Going Swedish or Danish?

One month later, in December 1985, the Minister of Health, Ragnhildur Helgadóttir of the Independence Party (a conservative, right-wing party), proposed an amendment to the laws governing the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases that would classify AIDS as a venereal disease. Such a classification required HIV-positive people to be registered and to identify their sexual partners. Failure to comply with registration and partner disclosure could result in penalties and imprisonment. The proposal was in line with measures taken in Sweden, which Ragnhildur favored over the more liberal stance adopted in Denmark (*Alþingistíðindi* 1985, A 91; see also Vallgård 2007).

The amendment was challenging on many levels. First, there was the question of personal freedom and privacy, as the law required HIV-positive people to be registered under their full names and identify their sexual partners for tracking. Furthermore, MPs questioned how HIV/AIDS fit within the existing legal framework, since the legislation addressed curable diseases (gonorrhea, chlamydia, and syphilis),

whereas HIV/AIDS was incurable and therefore required an approach that would have to take into account the complex social dimensions of a contagious, lethal disease. The rationale behind the amendment defined HIV/AIDS as an incurable venereal disease, but there was no mention of AIDS as a lethal disease with psychosocial consequences such as depression, fear, isolation, and stigmatization. Nor did it address the disproportionate spread of HIV/AIDS among marginalized groups such as gay men.

The ignorance of the complexity of HIV/AIDS revealed a form of linguistic uncertainty regarding how to address homosexuality among MPs. Referring to homosexuality as *kynvilla* would have been too vulgar, yet committing to terms such as *samkynhneigð* or *hommi* was still not mainstream. The majority of MPs, including Ragnhildur Helgadóttir, thus avoided mentioning homosexuality altogether. Several MPs, such as Kristín Kvaran and Guðrún Helgadóttir, referred to AIDS as an entirely different disease, since it had societal and cultural dimensions that the “old” diseases did not. It therefore required an altogether different approach. Furthermore, they criticized their fellow MPs for failing to recognize the link between the pandemic and the social situation of gay men (*Alþingistiðindi* 1985, B-1686). Several other MPs agreed that AIDS was a “different disease” but could not agree on how to prevent, treat, or care for patients or those at risk.

The final version of the amendment made registration anonymous, albeit under the condition that this was a “temporary solution” (*Alþingistiðindi* 1985, A91.B). Despite this designation as temporary, the laws were not modified until 1997 (*Alþingistiðindi* 1997).

Parliament lacked sufficient knowledge to address the social situation of gay men, resulting in institutional reluctance and ignorance. Furthermore, the Icelandic government’s neglect of the social aspects of the AIDS crisis, and its failure to acknowledge the intersection of health, discrimination, stigmatization, and sexuality that the crisis entailed, demonstrated that notions of intimacy were not yet considered politically important. The parliamentary discussions, however, revealed an undercurrent of upheaval, as both defenders and opponents of the

amendment pointed out that a new approach to AIDS was needed – one removed from the sensationalist and prejudiced media coverage grounded in the concept of *kynvilla* (*Alþingistíðindi* 1985, A91.B).

During the final round of discussion in 1986, Ragnhildur Helgadóttir mentioned having watched a television broadcast featuring the story of an anonymous young man with AIDS who had dedicated his life to helping others fight the disease. Ragnhildur voiced her admiration for the young man, his courage, and altruism, and claimed that his story demonstrated “how there are in fact many positions that must be taken into consideration” (*Alþingistíðindi* 1986-B, 2181). However, she did not connect this observation to the resolution proposed a month earlier or to the criticism raised by Guðrún and Kristín.

Telling a new story: A national hero emerges

As Plummer has noted, each story has its time and place and is embedded within the local and the situational (Plummer 2003, 99). Given the importance of the construction of homosexuality as a foreign threat and the framework of *kynvilla*, intimate stories of homosexuality required social negotiation on multiple platforms before becoming collectively viable. The MPs’ call for a new approach required an alteration of the idea of homosexuality as *kynvilla*. The admiration expressed by the Minister of Health upon hearing the story of a young man with ambitions to improve the lives of others hinted at a viable narrative that could pave the way for a new imagery of AIDS.

Public stories of intimacy were (and still are) a popular strategy for creating awareness of gay and lesbian lives – a social process that connects the private and the personal to the public and the political (Plummer 1995, 82). Such stories played a pivotal role in raising awareness of homosexual lives in Iceland. The origin story of S78 is closely linked to the coming-out interview of one of its founders, Hörður Torfason, in 1974, and in 1983, a lesbian couple, Lilja Steingrimsdóttir and Lára Marteins, opened their home to a cover-story interview, as they believed that the public should know how lesbians lived (Jósefsson 2008; Valdimarsson 1983). Hörður, Lára, and Lilja all claimed that their pub-

lic coming out was a political act, and they were aware of the possible consequences, such as loss of housing, ostracization from families, and the risk of unemployment (Martin & Steingrimsdóttir 2019; Jóseppsson 2008).

In 1986, the first Icelandic HIV-positive person stepped forward in an interview on national television. Sævar Guðnason was a thirty-seven-year-old gay man who lived in Copenhagen. According to one of his first interviews, his motives for going public were clear: to eradicate prejudice and misconceptions about people living with AIDS and to promote awareness through education (Hauksson 1987, 18). Sævar appeared in an elaborate cover interview in *Heimsmýnd*, a glossy magazine, in November 1987. Although the interview centered on Sævar, it also featured various background stories and descriptions of gay lifestyles and underground (gay) sex life in Copenhagen, which aimed to contextualize Sævar's story.

Here, the story of Sævar serves as an example of what Ahmed would call a “would-be citizen.” It constituted a political act calling for change by creating a discursive space for the importance of intimacy while simultaneously adhering to notions of worthiness, for example by displaying responsibility toward AIDS prevention, which was one of the primary moral imperatives placed on the gay community during the early years of the pandemic (Adams 2017, 182–185).

The interview was carefully crafted and decorated with photographs, and a clear effort was made to describe Sævar's subtle manners, appearance, and home. Its aim was clearly to evoke sympathy among readers toward Sævar, but also to provide an “honest description” of gay men living with AIDS (Þorvarðardóttir 1987, 44). Sævar was described as a modest man who dressed in simple clothing, and whose apartment was minimalist, practical, and free from extravagance and vanity. Before he fell ill, he had a stable job and savings, and the journalist claimed that his strong work ethic stemmed from his upbringing in rural Iceland, where the struggle for survival taught him valuable life skills. Sævar was honest about having behaved irresponsibly, and although he held no one accountable but himself, he wished he had had more knowledge

about the nature of HIV. He therefore had a clear purpose in coming forward, as he chose to tell his story to eradicate misconceptions and prejudice about people with AIDS and to encourage education, honest communication, and responsibility. Through these virtues, he believed that individuals, as well as society as a whole, could break the vicious circle of AIDS.

The role of Copenhagen was a central feature in Sævar's story. Copenhagen, albeit not perfect, offered him a variety of possibilities for intimacy that Reykjavík (or Iceland) could not. These included peer support, secure housing, social support, and access to physicians and social services, all of which specialized in caring for people with AIDS. The distance between Copenhagen and Iceland formed a barrier between two different realities, which created a safe platform for Sævar to speak publicly about his status as an HIV-positive gay man.

The image of Copenhagen as a safe haven for homosexual Icelanders was well established (Svona fólk episode 2; Blaðahópurinn 1983). The framing of Copenhagen as a place of care and emotional well-being was, however, novel. Sævar was a different kind of sexual refugee, one who relied on Copenhagen for care rather than for coming out, parties, or sex. By stating that he benefited from care structures that he could not imagine enjoying in Iceland, Sævar unavoidably portrayed Iceland as a place unable to provide structures of emotional well-being because of the fear of discrimination.

The shifting of responsibility played a fundamental role in Sævar's image, as his portrayal in *Heimsmýnd* at times resembled a biblical image of the repentant sinner. Although he felt remorse and regretted his previous behavior, he took full personal responsibility for his actions. He encouraged others to do so as well by setting an example as an outspoken HIV-infected gay man. He advocated safe sex and monogamy, or the reduction of the number of sexual partners and unprotected sex. By underlining his transformation from irresponsibility to responsibility – both in relation to his own behavior and in his responsibility for educating others – Sævar introduced the idea of the gay man as taking responsibility for curbing the pandemic (rather

than spreading it) – an idea that has remained a baseline for constructions of responsibility around AIDS since the mid-1980s (Adams 2017, 182–185).

The image of Sævar as a responsible HIV-positive gay man was further highlighted in an additional rubric article that was unrelated to Sævar's story. The purpose of the rubric article was to provide additional information for the reader to contextualize the content of the interview. Under the title "The Terrifying Backstage," readers were informed about a new type of sexual deviant, who chose to ignore the dangers of AIDS. First, it told the story of an anonymous HIV-positive female prostitute who refused to disclose her status to her customers and claimed that condom use "was their responsibility, not mine" (Þorvarðardóttir 1987, 136). Second, it featured a short interview with an anonymous Icelandic gay man who drew clear lines between responsible gays like himself and bisexual men, who were portrayed as still oblivious to the pending dangers of AIDS, and claimed: "We do not fear normal gays; rather, we fear the closeted ones or the bisexual ones because they do not think about AIDS the way we do."

The notion of responsibility in the interview was displayed through the practice of safe sex and HIV/AIDS awareness, which were attributed to gay men, while bisexual men – portrayed as dishonest about their true identity – were described as refusing to face the reality of HIV/AIDS and use condoms (Þorvarðardóttir 1987, 138). The image of the bisexual male as an irresponsible and unenlightened figure of cross-contamination into heterosexual society had been brewing beneath the surface for some time through sensationalist journalism as well as within the state institutions such as the Ministry of Health (Sveinbjörnsdóttir 1987; National Archive of Iceland, letter from the Surgeon General to the Ministry of Health 19 November 1986).

The interview in *Heimsmýnd* thus tells a story of intimacy drawn along the lines of images of sickness and health. It mobilizes a familiar trope in which the source and spreader of the plague is a sinful deviant on the margins of society who not only destroys themselves but also poses a dangerous threat to society (Gillian 1987; Sontag 1978). As

Gayle Rubin has argued in her elaboration of the hierarchies of sexualities, modern capitalist societies maintain strong moral boundaries that reward social mobility and institutional support to those who adhere to standards of respectable sexuality (Rubin 1993, 151). The interview in *Heimsmýnd* sought to remove repentant men like Sævar from the category of sinners who brought illness upon themselves by portraying them as good and responsible citizens. In contrast, the female sexual deviant and the bisexual male were positioned to fill the ranks of the unwanted through their irresponsible behavior and perceived refusal to repent.

According to Plummer, stories are a fundamental framing device for recognizing and acting upon human values (Plummer 2019, 10). Stories can influence people; they can lead to change, whether by justifying control, regulating behavior, or fostering more liberal attitudes. Or, as Leonard & Ellen claim, “They [stories] are also thought to perform the more public function of activating communities of listeners and creating new possibilities for living – for example, by inspiring and advancing various political projects or collective claims to citizenship” (Ellen 2007, 38; Plummer 1995). Sævar’s story can be interpreted as an attempt to answer the call for a different image of AIDS articulated by MPs during the parliamentary discussions of 1985–1986. It remains impossible to know with certainty whether Sævar was the young altruistic man to whom the Minister of Health referred in her final speech during those discussions but it is tempting to keep this possibility open. Sævar’s story was, of course, not the only story that contributed to a new understanding of intimacy, but its popularity and his status as a pioneer signaled a shift in the contextualization of gay men and AIDS – a possibility for articulating a new story.

Introduction of happiness

The notion that Icelandic society had failed to be a place of emotional security for people like Sævar became the main argument when the resolution from 1985 resurfaced in the Icelandic Parliament in 1992. However, this time around, MPs from the Women’s Alliance, a femi-

nist party that defined itself outside the left–right spectrum, took up the banner. In the parliamentary discussions that followed, a new idea of the homosexual citizen was constructed. Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, one of the key presenters in Parliament, opened her speech by reminding her fellow MPs that homosexuality was not the source of unhappiness or misfortune; rather, a homophobic and prejudiced society was, and homosexuals could indeed lead happy lives (*Alþingistíðindi* 1991–1992). With this straightforward remark, Ingibjörg sought to break away from the idea that queerness equals unhappiness. As Sara Ahmed and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have demonstrated, unhappy queers and shame are a crucial part of queer genealogy, as reflected in books and fiction of the early and mid-twentieth century, where queer acts and choices were often portrayed as leading to unhappiness and death (Ahmed 2010; Sedgwick 2008). As elaborated by Ahmed, the binary of un/happiness is a powerful discursive tool for creating good and bad associations between objects and desire; therefore some choices, such as heterosexual marriage, are linked to happiness, whereas others, such as same-sex love, are not (Ahmed 2010). By claiming that unhappiness was not an inevitable trait of homosexuality, Ingibjörg thus sought to align homosexuals with the normal, happy, heterosexual population.

Ingibjörg was not the only MP who used the concept of happiness to argue for homosexual rights. Her statements about happiness were further elaborated in an emotional speech by Guðrún Helgadóttir, a member of the left-wing People's Alliance. Guðrún's point of departure underlined the idea that the state owed its subjects, heterosexuals and homosexuals alike, happiness:

We do not discuss happiness too much here, in the distinguished halls of Parliament. However, happiness should be the main goal of all political work: to increase the happiness of the nation. As a matter of fact, this is why we are elected, and nothing works against happiness as much as hiding one's innermost feelings. (*Alþingistíðindi* 1991–1992 B)

Guðrún's articulation of what we might call the "promise of happiness," to use Ahmed's terminology, amounted to a rather radical redefinition of the role of Parliament, as she positioned happiness as a central component of citizenship. Guðrún was one of Iceland's most beloved children's book authors, and her claims about inclusion and the deservingness of homosexuals therefore carried cultural weight. Like Ingibjörg, Guðrún sought to break away from a homophobic past and redraw the nation's boundaries to include homosexuals. This inclusion, however, was not unconditional. The latter half of Guðrún Helgadóttir's argument about happiness included a definition of what ideal happiness should look like. Guðrún stated that:

It is beneficial to all that homosexuals can lead a normal family life, because the hiding games those people have had to play cause undesirable lifestyles, such as loose morals and promiscuity, which benefit no one – neither homosexuals nor heterosexuals. When AIDS arrived, it became clearer than ever that loose sexual morals, for both heterosexuals and homosexuals, are not desirable and are potentially dangerous. (Alþingistiðindi 1991–1992, B5292)

Here, Guðrún invoked the opposite – unhappiness – which she framed as the result of promiscuity and casual sexual encounters. By inviting homosexuals to choose to live their lives in the "right" way and become worthy of happiness, Guðrún simultaneously made a clear distinction between happy and unhappy lifestyle choices. It thus became evident that the happiness being proposed was conditional and confined to the heteronormative ideal of monogamous couple relationships and family life. The conditionality of happiness was further emphasized in her concluding remarks, in which she highlighted how homosexuals had proven their worth:

It must be said that no one took that matter [HIV/AIDS] as seriously or showed as much responsibility toward this disease as the Icelandic Association of homosexuals. (Alþingistiðindi 1991–1992, B5292)

By displaying responsibility in relation to the dangers of AIDS, homosexuals were thus portrayed as having earned their rights as citizens. The amendment was approved by Parliament. The connection between responsibility in the face of the AIDS crisis and earning citizen rights was particularly emphasized by the General Committee on AIDS, a committee established by the Ministry of Health in 1988 as a platform for the coordination of AIDS prevention. In a letter of recommendation supporting the amendment, the committee stated: “In order to keep homo- and bisexuals responsible during the time of AIDS, we must recognize their existence and their rights to participate in society. Therefore, the committee wholeheartedly supports this amendment” (Landsnefnd um alnæmisvarnir 1992).

An unfortunate event

Following the amendment, a committee was formed with the purpose of combating discrimination against homosexuals in Iceland. The report, published in 1994, is often regarded as a watershed moment in the history of lesbian and gay rights in Iceland, as it laid the foundation for judicial improvements in the following years, such as registered partnership and anti-discrimination legislation in 1996 (Ásgeirsdóttir 2008, 40–41).

As Þorsteinn Vilhjálmsson has shown, the report was deeply characterized by a demand for homonormativity, as it promoted attempts to integrate what had once been a taboo – homosexuality – into existing dominant structures and institutions (Vilhjálmsson 2022). The happiness script played a crucial role in advancing these ideas as an entrance to citizenship by creating a firm divide between good and desirable choices – which were positioned as the central premise for acquiring citizenship – and bad and undesirable ones, which confined homosexuals to the margins of society. The report further elaborated on ideas advanced by MPs such as Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir and Guðrún Helgadóttir, seeking to break away from a troubled past by linking homosexuality to a set of goals and values held by the heterosexual majority. The report explained that previously homosexuality had been:

[I]ncompatible with getting an education, setting up a home, getting an interesting job, gaining a successful career, or taking part in social life; [and] if a homosexual person chooses to reveal their homosexuality, they must also reject normal values and goals. (Grétarsson 1994, 16)

One of the proposed solutions for orienting homosexuals toward “normal values and goals” was to grant official recognition to homosexual cohabitation which would:

[I]mpose duties on [the homosexual couple] and give them rights analogous to those of [heterosexual] spouses, this would no doubt encourage stability and furnish security for homosexuals and improve their position in society considerably. [Laws regarding registered partnership] would give homosexual people the same opportunities as others to lead their lives in an approved of manner, it would create firm basis for their lives, give them security and make them conscious of their rights as citizens. (Grétarsson 1994, 16, translation Vilhjálmsson 2022)

Here, citizenship rights are linked to specific norms and behaviors, through which a desirable life is channeled. Although only briefly mentioned, AIDS plays a small but important role in the report, which claims that:

It can be presumed that the severe dangers of AIDS have only harmed the homosexual community, but that is not the case. The appearance of AIDS has in many ways changed the position of homosexuals. They, as individuals and as a group, have had to admit that AIDS is present among them and have had to fight for rational and responsible reactions. As a result, the public has had to acknowledge their existence as a normal and natural part of society. Thus, AIDS has contributed to general discussions concerning homosexual issues. (Grétarsson 1994, 18)

AIDS is thus represented as an unfortunate event that brought homosexuals and the state together. The homosexual is portrayed as a deserving citizen – a would-be citizen – ready to step into the realm of citizenship.

As the boundaries of sexual hierarchies and respectability were shifting to include monogamous homosexuals, new boundaries between respectability and sexual peril were simultaneously being constructed to secure the newly gained status of gays and lesbians. Already in the *Heimsmynd* interview, the journalist had taken up the trope of bisexual deviance, casting bisexual men as the current carriers of the virus.

In a full-page spread in the newspaper *Tíminn* in 1988, dedicated to AIDS prevention, the chair of S78 emphasized that reaching out to bisexual men was a top priority. According to this account, bisexual men were unable to confront their homosexuality and were therefore at risk, as they did not identify with campaigns aimed at homosexual men (Ólafsson 1988). However, by labeling bisexual men as merely cheating husbands or closeted gays, activists within S78 fed into fears of bisexual men as potential carriers of the virus into the heterosexual population. The question of bisexuality later caused a major rift within S78, culminating in a split at the organization's general meeting in 1993, after a slim majority voted down a proposal to include bisexuals in the organization. Some opponents of the proposal adopted a moralistic stance, linking bisexuality to other non-respectable behaviors such as transvestism, transsexuality and pedophilia, and even accused the bisexual fraction of the heinous crime of keeping a secret list of HIV-positive men – a rumor that was fiercely contested (Ólafsdóttir & Sigurðardóttir 1992; Ungliðahreyfingin 1992). Others adopted a political stance against the inclusion of bisexuals, fearing that it would water down the agenda and stall long-awaited legal reforms (Eddudóttir 2017).

Securing boundaries by creating moral authority and distinguishing between the respectable and the unruly is essential to respectability (Rubin 1993; Joshi 2012). Bisexuals and trans people who were associated with practices such as keeping lists of HIV-positive people and pedophilia now filled the ranks of the unwanted, thus displaying the moral superiority of gays and lesbians. There was, however, one other

group that was excluded from the image of the happy homosexual citizen. Despite AIDS being described as “not only harmful” in the report (Grétarsson 1994, 18), the lived realities of people with AIDS went unmentioned. Neither the report nor the preceding parliamentary discussions made any reference to people suffering from AIDS. The outlook for gay men at risk of AIDS in Iceland in the early 1990s was bleak. In 1993 – the year before the publication of the report – there was a record number of AIDS-related deaths in Iceland, when eight people died, and the infection rate did not begin to decline until 1995 (Indriðason et al. 2014). There was no place for loss, grief, sickness, or death within the script of happiness, respectability and citizenship rights. As Ahmed has pointed out, however, would-be citizens are often bound by the happiness duty not to speak about difficult past. The happiness script is a forward-propelling force, directing subjects toward a promised happy future, and integration into national ideals requires leaving certain experiences behind while embracing new ones (Ahmed 2010, 137).

Conclusions

In his study of the establishment of same-sex partnerships in Scandinavia, the Swedish historian Jens Rydström noted that AIDS created “a sense of urgency that something had to be done about the life situation of gay men,” while not being explicitly used as an argument for establishing laws regarding same-sex relationships (Rydström 2011, 67). In Iceland, this sense of urgency concerned how to address homosexuality and introduce a new cultural context for same-sex love and relationships that was detached from the framework of *kynvilla*.

The general disregard for homosexuality as a relevant social issue became clear in 1985, when Kristín Kvaran’s amendment to eradicate discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation failed to gain traction in Parliament and was largely ignored a month later, when MPs discussed laws regarding AIDS as a venereal disease. The framing of AIDS as a disease free from social connections reveals a reluctance to acknowledge or address the marginalized positions of homosexuals. However, a growing willingness to approach AIDS beyond the tropes

of either foreign corruption or *kynvilla* suggested a need for a different storyline – or at least a readiness to listen to the stories of homosexuals.

Sævar's story is a prime example of the interconnections between citizenship and intimacy. His story made strong claims to inclusion on the grounds of sexuality, as his homosexuality drove him away from Iceland. In Copenhagen, he not only found sexual freedom but also a community of care when he fell ill. By adding story elements such as responsibility toward AIDS and the need for education and honest communication, Sævar's story articulated clear demands for change and emphasized homosexuals as would-be citizens.

At the same time, the framework of his story reveals a strong desire to adhere to national norms and values, such as responsibility, proud heritage, and the yearning to contribute to society. Sævar's qualities were further highlighted by being placed alongside stories of less favorable figures: the irresponsible female sex worker and the dishonest bisexual man. The construction of Sævar's story resembles what Douglas Crimp calls a narrative of maturing, in which the HIV/AIDS pandemic becomes an event that enables personal growth of the gay community (Crimp 2003). In Sævar's case, the notion of maturing took on elements of heteronormative assimilation, such as the emphasis on his modest – rather than boisterous and camp – clothing, minimalist home, and conformity with capitalist bourgeois society. Although intimate storytelling has proven to be an undoubtedly successful strategy for the LGBT community, its tangibility rests on notions of conformity. Stories of intimacy can thus also be understood as assimilative performances that seek to reproduce and secure existing boundaries (De Ridder & Dhaenens 2019, 46).

When the amendment from 1985 resurfaced in 1992, a reconstruction of homosexuality had taken place. Gays and lesbians were no longer constrained by ideas of homosexuality as foreign deviance but were instead offered the promise of happiness – or even, as Guðrún Helgadóttir elaborated, the state owed them happiness. The idea of conditional happiness was repeated and further elaborated in the 1994 report on the conditions of homosexuals, and it became the foundation for an

era of homonormativity, as the happiness script continued to function as a moral imperative and even as a sign of national progress (Ellenberger & Vilhjálmsson 2022, 1482). However, one should not forget that this happiness proposal was not confined to homosexuals but was rather, as Guðrún declared, intended to increase happiness within the nation as a whole. Guðrún's happiness proposal can thus also be read as a response to the authority of emotional and sexual subjectivity in an increasingly individualistic society (Weeks 1995, 39). Claims to inclusion through notions of intimacy were not unknown strategies among lesbian and gay activists before the advent of AIDS. However, the anchoring of homosexual intimacy within national values and normalization was a novel construction – one that created the possibility of bringing the state and the lesbian and gay movement closer together, thereby establishing the necessary ground for cooperation on issues such as prevention and treatment.

As Plummer and other theorists of the boundaries of citizenship have pointed out, privileged groups in society usually insist that the inclusion of other groups take the form of requiring the oppressed to adopt the values of the dominant group (Plummer 2003, 53–55). Happiness, understood as a technology of citizens, creates and maintains such hierarchies of conditional inclusion. It is not merely a moral manual outlining correct values; happiness is a privilege of certain people, as their happiness comes first. Or, in the words of Ahmed: “For those who are positioned as coming after, happiness means following somebody else's goods” (Ahmed 2010, 133). The shift from the margins toward the center was not achieved on equal terms for the Icelandic lesbian and gay movement, as the invitation to join the nation on the grounds of deserved happiness required alignment with existing social structures.

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NOTES

1. Albeit still thriving among members of the National Church and evangelical congregations and moral conservatives.