**Nordic Council of Ministers’ event at the CSW60 2016**

**Theme: Gender Equality and the Sustainable Development Goals**

**Eyðgunn Samuelsen, Minister of Social Affairs will speak on the matter of “Reduced Inequalities”**

Dear Ministers - Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to be part of such a distinguished gathering for this important event. I would like to thank my Finnish colleague and the Nordic Council of Ministers for this opportunity.

The link between gender equality and sustainable development is one of the most important issue for the future of my small island nation in the North Atlantic – the Faroe Islands – with a population of just under 50,000.

Like our neighbouring Nordic countries, the Faroes has a high standard of living, an equal society, a well-developed welfare system, which provides for a high standard of health, social services and education, as well as equal opportunities for men and women are firmly written into laws.

However, despite this high standard of living and a strong legal framework for gender equality, serious gender imbalances exist today in the Faroe Islands – and these are a serious threat to the future.

Even if the Faroes Islands is one of the most equal societies in the world – when it comes to income – the Faroes are significantly different from the other Nordic countries – and quite unequal, when it comes to income between men and women.

Traditional gender roles prevail, which means that the men are the main breadwinners, while women have the main responsibility of the home and the upbringing of children.

This is reflected in the large number of women working in part-time jobs; more than 50% of women work part time. This again has an effect on the wage income; women earn 40% of the total wages in the Faroes – even though the participation of women in the workforce is one of the largest in the world, with 83% of women being active on the labour market (in the age between 15-64).

This has a great effect on women – both whilst they are on the labour market, but also when they leave the labour market with lower pension in old age.

Another example that the traditional gender-roles prevail, is the small percentage of women in politics, even if we the latter years slowly have been catching up with our Nordic neighbours.

In recent years, the government has had a campaign to help raise consciousness and address this imbalance, and these efforts have helped. After the last national election in September last year, nearly a third of MPs in the Faroese parliament today are women.

Moreover, for the first time we have gender equality in the Ministers in cabinet.

However, there is still a long way to go, when we look at leadership in the political parties, or the political participation in the municipalities, especially outside the capital.

Gender imbalance in politics is not our biggest challenge, however. It is more a symptom of a larger problem.

The real concern for the future sustainability of our nation is the striking level of outmigration of women from the Faroe Islands in recent years.

This has left our small population with a large deficit of younger women – women with an increasingly higher level of education – women who can – and should be – contributing to economic growth in the Faroe Islands.

The deficit of women in childbearing age is one of the greatest challenges of the Faroe Islands. Therefore, the link between gender equality and sustainable development is one of the most important issues for the future.

This trend is very dangerous, and we need to reverse it – but the question is – how?

To find solutions, we also need to understand the causes.

A certain level of outmigration from the Faroes has long been a fact of life. Faroese people are generally very mobile and good at adapting to living and working in other countries. I am sure this is true of most island peoples and for people living in the periphery.

But were as this challenge for the periphery is within the countries boarders, this tendency poses a greater threat to the Faroese society, since the outmigration means that people leave the Faroes, and no longer contribute to the larger society – neither economically, socially or culturally.

Most young Faroese people, who want a higher education, have to leave the country, and a large number of these young people – especially women – do not return, but establish a life and career elsewhere, which is normal when you are young. This distorts the demography of the Faroes, which is a threat to the future sustainability of the welfare state.

But why is the real “brain-drain” today so clearly among young women? I believe it has a lot to do with the fact that our society and economy is so highly dependent on fisheries and other male dominant industries.

It is primary industries – focussed on capture and production of marine resources for the international food market.

It is a male-dominated sector, still very much grounded in a traditional hunting mentality – with a typically short-term approach to business and development.

This is not a sector, which has managed to create jobs that appeal to women in a modern welfare society.

The Faroe Islands will continue to be a nation dependent on the sea and sustainable fisheries in the future. We have survived as a unique culture and society in the North Atlantic for more than a thousand years. But without the meaningful contribution of women to the future development of our economy and our major industries, I believe the sustainability of our entire society is at risk.

For women living in the Faroes, the large majority is working in traditional female jobs, like nurses, kinder garden teachers and health personnel, which mainly is part-time, and hence relatively low-paid jobs.

And even if 20% of the women working in part time jobs wish to work full time, this opportunity is not available to them. Thus, these women are maintained in low paid jobs, which put them in a very fragile and dependent situation.

Even more so, this puts especially female single parents in a vulnerable situation, and there is a tendency that female single parents move to Denmark, due to the difficulties maintaining a sufficient living foundation for themselves and their children in the Faroes.

The Government is taking this challenge most seriously, and have introduced – and is working to introduce – a number of different improvements and benefits aimed to reduce these inequalities.

One of the most pressing issues to address is the inequality that persist on the labour market. And it is necessary to change the structures in labour market, in order to get more equal opportunities for men and women. However, the Government is also aware of the challenges to overcome the barriers that exists, and it will be a long haul before we reach equal pay between women and men.

One way to address this is to have an active gender policy. One of the element in an active gender policy is urging fathers to take part of the maternity leave, which hopefully will be a start to equal responsibility in the home and upbringing of the children.

Another element is to address the general conception of the gender roles that prevail, starting by providing relevant information material for children, both in kinder garden, in schools and college, in order for children to discuss these issues at their level.

Overall, the aim of the gender policy is to create the best framework for a society, where both women and men thrive equally well.

The Government is also making efforts that aim to improve the possibilities for younger families to establish themselves in the Faroes, with a more diversified housing policy, as well as introducing a number of benefits, especially aimed at families with children.

In addition, the Government is working to improve educational opportunities as well as creating housing facilities for students, in order to prevent a large number of young people leaving the country, with the risk of not coming back.

These effort, as well as economic progress, seems to have improved the number of young people returning to the Faroe Islands, even though there still is a long way to go.

Thank you for listening!