

Dear Ministers, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to be part of such an important event, where we will discuss efforts towards greater gender equality in the Arctic.

I would like to extend my warmest thanks to the organizers for gathering all of us to this conference here in the Faroe Islands,

and rightfully choose the topic of gender equality as a crucial factor in “Building Dynamic Economic and Sustainable Communities in the North.”

*

Today we will discuss the current realities and future challenges concerning gender equality in the Arctic.

The Arctic is facing a number of challenges, such as climate change, youth unemployment and women’s out-migration.

I believe that gender equality policies play a central role in tackling these and other challenges.

*

There is a growing realization globally that in order to achieve sustainable growth, societies need to make use of the full potential and talent of the entire population – women and men.

Societies, where women and men have equal opportunities and participate at the same level, becomes better to live in, it becomes more competitive and the business sector becomes more versatile.

Like our neighbouring Nordic countries, the Faroe Islands has a high standard of living, a well-developed welfare system, which provides for a high standard of health, social services and education, as well as we have had a gender equality law for almost 25 years.

However, despite this high standard of living, and the fact that 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 is quite unequal – when it comes to income between men and women.

*

The explanation, I believe, lies in that the Faroese society is quite traditional in many ways.

Being highly dependent on nature, traditional gender roles prevail.

Men are the main breadwinners, while women have the main responsibility of the home and the upbringing of children.

A large number of men work on the sea or abroad. More than half of all women work-part time. Men are predominant in management in the private sector and in politics.

In addition, when it comes to paid salaries, men overall earn double of the total wages paid in the Faroes.

*

The real concern for the future sustainability is the striking level of out-migration of women from the Faroe Islands, and we have a deficit of women in childbearing age.

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.

This distorts the demography of the Faroes, which is a threat to the future sustainability.

But why is it especially the young women that out-migrate?

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.

The sector has not managed to create jobs that appeal to women in a modern welfare society, and this needs to change.

The Faroe Islands will continue to be a nation dependent on the sea and sustainable fisheries in the future.

Nevertheless, 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.

*

It is imminent that we reverse this trend.

One of the main goals of this Government is to create a modern welfare society, which attracts people and business to the Faroes.

One important factor to reverse the trend, that young people move abroad to study, has of course been that the University in the Faroes over the last years has doubled the places available for students, as well as the Government has led an active family policy.

At the same time, we have adopted laws that acknowledge that not everybody fits in the boxes of the traditional way of living.

We want to create an open and tolerant society that has room for everybody and gives everyone equal rights and duties.

Most importantly, the excellent economic situation the last years with a high increase in export, has had the biggest effect on people moving back to the Faroes.

*

I have put forward a gender equality policy plan to Parliament, which has a number of different initiatives that aims to break down obstacles and reduce the gender gap.

It is difficult to make changes in society, when the predominant view is that the present situation is the right one.

The traditional gender roles are very strong, and the majority of the people seem to believe that this is the best way to organize society and our personal life.

I, however, believe that we need to make changes.

I believe that girls and boys should grow up knowing that their choices are not dependent on whether they are born male or female.

That women and men have the opportunity to have jobs in management and get high paid jobs.

That both women and men should have the opportunity to have a family life as well as a career.

One important element is to get more equal parental leave and equal share in the domestic work, which aims at getting at better work-life balance to the benefit for family as a whole.

*

In conclusion,

We do have a long way to go, and we need to get men involved in the gender equality issue.

Men have a crucial role to play in women's empowerment. However, we should not neglect that boys and men also have a lot to gain from a more equal society.

Many of the challenges in the Arctic are of a global nature, and some are maybe more regionally and culturally specific.

Nevertheless, we have a lot to gain from cooperation and learning from one another's experiences.

I believe that together we will make this plenary session fruitful.

Thank you for listening!