**Statement by the Norwegian Minister of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion Inga Marte Thorkildsen**

**to**

***The Global Initiative: Women Leaders for Women’s’ Rights for Women in Muslim Societies***

**Meeting 23-24 May 2013 Istanbul, Turkey**

In a context of converging threats to women's rights, changes in political landscapes in several countries and new opportunities for advocating for reform in the aftermath of the “Arab Spring”, *there is an urgent need to strengthen efforts* in favour of the protection and promotion of women's rights in Muslim societies.

An important universal experience is the benefit of engaging civil society, including organizations working for Human Rights and for gender equality. I had the pleasure to participate at the last meeting of the “The Global Initiative: Women Leaders for Women’s’ Rights for Women in Muslim Societies” in Oslo in January 2013. Norway is proud to support this kind of work internationally through our development cooperation.

There are different realities and different cultural contexts in different countries. But let us always keep in mind: universal human rights apply equally to *all* individuals - both to women and to men.

Structures of most societies, including my own, may discriminate against women. The inequality in power results in lower status for women and this in many cases is reinforced by political, economic and social discrimination. It gravely reduces women’s ability to exercise their fundamental rights.

In many countries today religion is sometimes used by political authorities seeking to justify discriminatory measures against women. There are also non-governmental religious actors whom have been very active on many of the international arenas where gender equality is on the agenda, with their own agenda to promote the opposite of gender equality.

Using arguments of religious freedom and cultural diversity to deprive women and girls of their basic Human Rights is unacceptable.

Over the past years Norway has witnessed how moral values have been evoked, to deprive women of their Human Rights, their opportunities - and ultimately, for some - their life!

It has become increasingly challenging to gain support for both legal and political obligations concerning women’s rights and the advancement of women at an international level. An alliance of conservative states, organisations representing civil society and religious societies that appear intent to weaken the international gender equality agenda and norms and values that have already been agreed on. This alliance appears to be campaigning in many forums and on many levels and pose a considerable challenge for all progressive countries that wish to strengthen women’s position.

Last year the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) failed to agree on the final document, mainly because of this unfortunate climate. This year the CSW did manage to agree on the final document on the way forward, but only after long and hard negotiations and with the help from civil society. This brings hope to our work.

On behalf of the Norwegian Government I strongly support the global initiative to fight for human rights for women in Muslim societies. This initiative is about the importance of bringing together a range of civil society actors, based in Muslim societies, employing different, complementary strategies to prevent setbacks in the struggle for gender equality and to push forward reforms.

I wish you good luck with your further discussions and efforts to mobilize civil society actors for the promotion of gender equality in Muslim societies all over the world.

Norway will continue to promote UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and work actively to ensure that gender equality and equal rights and equal opportunities for women and men are at the centre of the international agenda. This includes the active participation of civil society.