

Women as
**PEACEBUILDERS &
AGENTS OF CHANGE**
in the Maldives

MARCH 2021



From
the People of Japan



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FOREWORD

On behalf of President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, I would like to thank the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) – Maldives and the Government of Japan for their generous assistance in the publication of this important study.

It is most refreshing, if not heartening, to see the words “women”, “peace-builders”, “agents” and “change” in the same sentence. At a time when we are battling the scourge of terrorism and violent extremism on our pristine shores famed for peace, we are finally putting our women where they rightfully belong, which is at the center of this key debate on peace-building and change-making.

In many ways, the Maldivian woman is the anchor of her island community. She holds the key to many, if not most, of life’s questions. When terror strikes, it is she and her children who pay the heaviest price, be it financially, emotionally or socially. Today, her voice needs to be heard more than ever before, and her concerns addressed through concrete action and policy responses.

As outlined in the Report, a gender-inclusive approach to peacebuilding is the need of the hour, given the multiple benefits this would bring to our homes and communities. It is this approach that speaks to the core of President Solih’s administration’s efforts to ensure the participation of women in all avenues of society, including peace-building

and counterterrorism. For example, the National Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism 2020 – 2024 passed by the Cabinet in July 2020, places special emphasis on harnessing the energy and potential of women to ensure peace and prosperity across all islands.

It is in this spirit that I reiterate the Government’s commitment to furthering our collective bid to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment in the Maldives. I am confident that the Report would be an immensely useful guide in strengthening our collective efforts to achieve the larger aim of creating a moderate, progressive, tolerant and peaceful nation.

Once again, I express my profound gratitude to UNDP Maldives and the Government of Japan for this valuable document, and to the energetic team at the National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC) for driving this instrumental endeavor towards a peaceful, stable and harmonious Maldives – true to who we are and to who we have always been.

UZA. MARIYA DIDI,
MINISTER OF DEFENCE

FOREWORD

Congratulations on the publication of the report “Women as Peacebuilders & Agents of Change in the Maldives”

As Japan being UNDP’s key partner on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) programs, I commend UNDP Maldives and the National Counter Terrorism Center of Maldives for undertaking the much needed study as part of the project, “Partnership for a Tolerant, Inclusive Bangladesh and Maldives,” and successfully identifying essential steps to meaningfully engage women in the decision-making that frames and impacts their lives at all levels.

Gender equality and empowerment of women are indispensable for promoting human security. The inclusion of women can and must take many forms; one that includes women could play more pivotal roles from the bottom up as well as from the top down, while engaging multiple stakeholders. In order to effectively engage women, it is critical that efforts should be made to prioritize women’s rights, empowerment, participation and leadership — both at the community level as well as in national decision-making.

Women in Maldives play instrumental roles at home and at work. They have made great strides in education and employment. Despite the apparent progress made in the advancement of women, there is still plenty of room for development in fully unleashing the potential and power of women in the country.

The recommendations set out in this study pave the way for addressing women’s interests and rights. It is crucial that these observations and findings are taken into considerations for future programming. Collaboration and coordination among all stakeholders are essential in finding effective approaches to the challenges surrounding the women and peace nexus.

I am confident that with our collective approach and efforts to engage women as peacemakers, we can work towards building more peaceful and inclusive societies.

HER EXCELLENCY YANAI KEIKO,
AMBASSADOR OF JAPAN TO MALDIVES

FOREWORD

Women are key to achieving sustainable peace and development solutions. Yet, women remain largely shut out of decision-making processes. One of the fundamental challenges is simple bias, as evidenced by UNDP's Gender Social Norms Index, released in 2020, which showed that worldwide, nine out of 10 people have a bias and prejudice against women.

This important study on 'Women as Peace Builders and Agents of Change in the Maldives', alludes to how applying a gender perspective in peace and political processes can mitigate bias, prevent further undermining of women's rights, and ensure inclusive and sustainable peacemaking and peace-building. In particular, the report's outline for a gendered analysis of radicalization and violent extremism is critical and timely.

As we commemorate the 21st anniversary of the U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security this year, I extend my sincere congratulations to the Maldivian government for setting in motion key development targets and priorities to create a safe, secure and inclusive society by reducing the threat of terrorism and violent extremism. I also congratulate the Maldivian government for being amongst the 90 countries that have crafted National Action Plans based on the critical framework for decision-making and sustainable solutions.

To build a just, inclusive, and peaceful society where gender equality is mainstreamed requires a coordinated and joined-up cooperation. UNDP is pleased to support

the whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach adopted by the government to prevent and counter violent extremism, premised around the central theme of social cohesion. We continue our support to our partners such as the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC), along with other stakeholders to engage women as social agents and drivers of positive change.

It is heartening to see our partnership bring to fruition initiatives such as this study conducted with the generous support from the Government of Japan, which paves way for future-looking strategies that would ensure women's participation and leadership in preventing violent extremism: that they are included in processes, policymaking, and interventions, and serve as advisors in preventing violent extremism.

Gender equality is an enabler and accelerator for the Sustainable Development Goals. UNDP stands ready to support the Government of Maldives embrace a gender responsive approach to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, which will create a sustainable pathway for better economies and peaceful and tolerant communities, as we Build Forward Better.

AKIKO FUJII,
UNDP RESIDENT REPRESENTATIVE
IN THE MALDIVES

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WHAT WOMEN SAY

You can only see my eyes and I still get harassed ... I've never seen a man step in and stop something from happening. Why can't men stop other men from doing this?



When you grow up and you hear things, you ask "Why didn't I learn this before?" In schools, there is not enough open thinking and questioning.



We have the first generation of women who had full access to education, including at the university and graduate level. There is a lot of disaffection out there as they have seen the "other side."



Women have to be over-qualified and highly connected to get into parliament. A normal middle-class woman couldn't get the money you need to be elected. Women are reluctant to run for office. They are targeted for their looks or their clothing. They are accused of neglecting their family. It is a daunting amount of pressure for women.



We need more women in island councils. They are more in touch with what is going on out on the islands. The parties all use women as grass roots workers but they won't give them positions of power.



Women don't have any training for leadership. Men have their social networks and financial networks. There is little pressure for structural changes. We need to show more clearly how little of the budget goes to support families and women.



There is no sustainable action. Most government money goes on cash payments and so there is no money for anything that changes the situation. When they do something, they don't think about how to sustain it. You have a building but no staff.



Men are criticized for supporting women. They get labelled as weak if they are seen being too nice to women. So, men are very reluctant to mentor women or help them.



Young people have no time or space to nurture a marriage. Everyone is packed in together. The pressures on them are enormous.



There is less mixing of people. There is less initiative among people. People used to come together to tackle problems. Now everyone just waits for the government to solve it. We need more local initiative.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ensuring that women have a full role in public life as leaders and decision-makers is essential if the Maldives is to address the problem of violent extremism. Over the past decade, the country has seen a rise in those rejecting mainstream values and adopting extreme positions. While the islands have been spared most violence at home, some 50 men and around 150 family members are known to have travelled to the Middle East to fight with armed groups there. The government's Strategic Action Plan lays out ways to create a tolerant, open and democratic state; however, to achieve this, it must harness the energy and potential of women.

Gender equality is an enabler and accelerator for the SDGs. A gender responsive approach to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda offers an opportunity to create a sustainable pathway for better economies and peaceful and tolerant communities. Engaging women in reducing the risks of violent extremism is critical, and the best way to do this is to strengthen their voice and participation in society at large rather than simply targeting their roles as wives and mothers. There is little evidence that women can prevent husbands or children becoming extremists, nevertheless, women do reduce the risks when they are in positions of authority and have a seat at the table when decisions are made.

The past 50 years have seen significant increases in life expectancy, wealth and the survival of children. However, given its position as a middle-income nation, it would be expected to have more women at the top levels of politics and government. There are only four women in the People's Majlis, making it the worst performer on this standard in South Asia. While there is a larger number of women in the Cabinet than before, women are mostly excluded from the heights of politics and the economy.

Beyond that, and perhaps more importantly, women struggle to get ahead in a system that is heavily stacked against them. Not only do they carry a heavy burden of traditional expectations as wives, mothers and daughters, those in the capital city Male' must also work long hours to pay for the high cost of living. They face sexual harassment and discrimination at work, catcalls

and intrusive comments on the streets and violence at home. The weight of structural violence falls on them: the police, the judiciary and social services do not provide protection or redress in an adequate manner for women. Almost all the 150 women interviewed for this study said they faced enormous limits on their lives and choices.

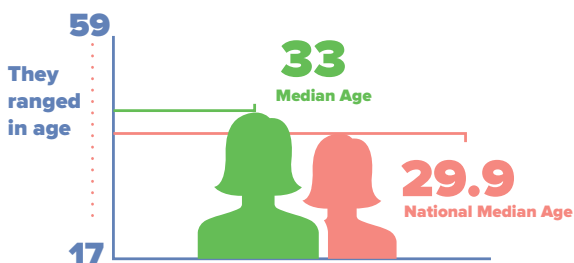
Politics in the Maldives has opened up significantly in the past dozen years, yet that time has also marked a rise in polarization and the emergence of extremism. The police estimate that some 1,400 people hold extremist views that could potentially translate into violence. Some within this group also restrict the lives of women and girls, denying them access to education and healthcare and forcing others into early marriages. Public discourse is hard on women; social media may have opened the public space, but it has also enabled the constant denigration of women, particularly those in public life.

The answers are not easy; women need more public support, particularly from leaders in society. The government must end impunity for sexual abuse and harassment and fund the support services for families mandated by law. Political parties must provide full backing for women who run in elections and speak out in their defense when they are slandered in public. Boys must be taught about the harm that comes from street harassment and girls must be given more freedom to engage and thrive in the public realm.

THE WOMEN WE INTERVIEWED FOR THIS STUDY

Interviewed
150+ women
 They included women serving in:

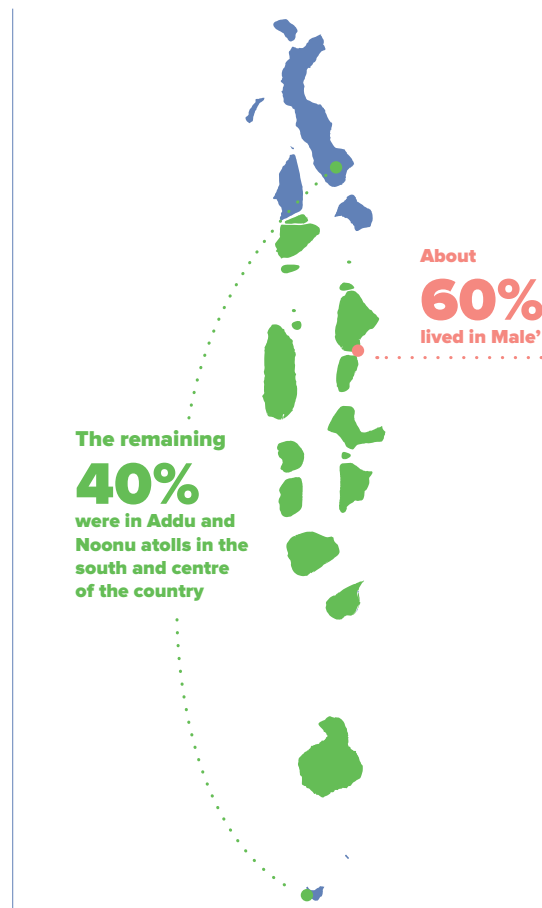
 Maldives National Defence Force	 Maldives Police Service	 women working in technology	 Teachers	 Doctors
 soldiers	 activists	 Trading and Social services	 Unemployed Women	 Self-employed Women
 Homemakers	 Civil servants	 mothers	 politicians	



We spoke to more than 150 women for this study, from many walks of life. They included women serving in: the Maldives National Defence Forces and the Maldives Police Service; women who work in the public and private sector; those working in technology, trading and social services; unemployed women and the self-employed. We talked to teachers, doctors, health professionals, soldiers, activists, homemakers, civil servants, entrepreneurs, mothers and politicians. They ranged in age from 17 to 59, with a median age of 33, slightly above the national median age of 29.9. About 60 percent lived in Male, although many of those came from other islands originally. The remaining 40 percent were in Addu and Noonu atolls in the south and centre of the country. The sample was better educated than the population at large with it dividing almost evenly among those educated up to 16 years, 18

years, degree level and postgraduate level. About half had children, with the numbers ranging from one to seven.

We asked the women to fill in a questionnaire and have used some of the information in this report together with the data from the focus group discussion we held. This data cannot be extrapolated to reflect the whole of Maldivian society as the sample is too small, it is not random and, while it reflects a range of women and their experiences, it does not line up with the demographics of the country. Our sample was older, better educated, wealthier and more urban than the population. However, it does provide the reader with some sense of the views of the women we spoke with. There were consistent messages that came through from the discussions; almost all shared similar experiences with some of the key problem's women face in the Maldives.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Establish safe spaces and platforms for the effective engagement of women in planning and policymaking processes at local and national levels. Ensure programmes are designed in consultation with women and take into account the existing gender norms.

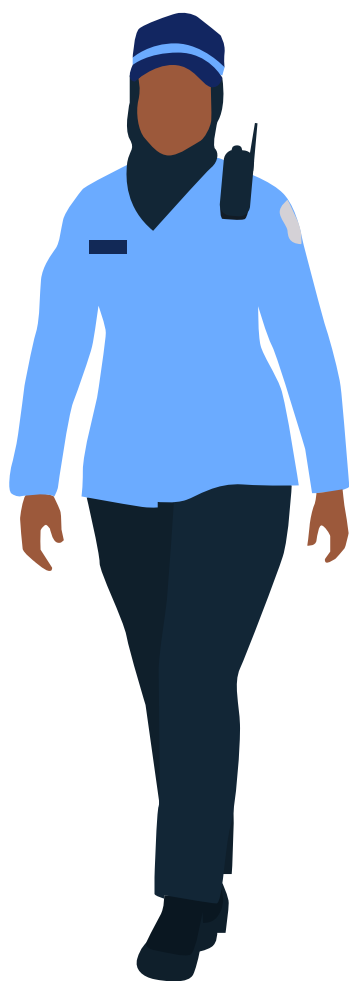


Online abuse and worsening misogyny must be tackled with digital literacy programs, new reliable sources of information and a much more proactive campaign to tackle extremist content and the abuse of women. Targeting teenagers will be essential.

Address structural violence starting with a critical analysis of the national budget to see how women are underserved in terms of protection and policing. This will aid women in taking their place in the public sphere.



Recognize that the role of specific PVE programmes targeting women is going to be limited. What is important is focusing on the broader position of women in society and ensuring they have full access to decision-making and the public sphere.



Recognize that issues of gender, particularly the problems of masculinity and misogyny, must be central in addressing the problems that underlie extremism, particularly crime, imprisonment, drugs and family breakdown. Further analysis is required to understand how gendered power relations contribute to the drivers of violent extremism including crime, drugs etc.

Many changes are underway in key areas: judicial reform is vital; more women should be recruited to the police; those who are violent towards women or children should face prosecution; social services must live up to their legal obligations to protect families; and a third of all positions on local councils will be reserved for women. All of these policies must be fully implemented with sufficient funding.

Women on outer islands need more political and financial support in building up their communities. The plan for decentralization must include specific efforts to support women on islands in building administrative capacity.

Fund internships for young women in local government that also includes training in such as areas as administration, computer skills, budgeting and management.

Justice sector reform efforts need to strengthen the implementation of the legislative framework, to ensure the rights of women and families are guaranteed.



POLICE RESPONSES: SOME PRINCIPLES

Engaging women in addressing violent extremism requires some delicacy. Initially, programmes focused on women as wives and mothers were based on an idea that women were intrinsically peacefully and controlled the private sphere. Women are less violent than men, but that is not to say they do not hold extremist views themselves or spread extremist messages to others. The past decade has seen a rising number of women engage in violent extremism. Islamic State actively recruited women, approving their roles in violent acts and in the enforcement of their world view. Women have been particularly active in online forums, recruiting others and raising funds.

Women have political and religious views of their own and programmes must consider their views rather than starting with assumptions about them. Women have knowledge that is often lacking in the design of peacebuilding programs.

Women interviewed for this research were split over whether they had influence to stop their children or husbands becoming extremists. Often programmes that engage women start with the assumption that they do hold such influence even though there is little evidence for this. Some women felt they had influence over children but almost none believed the same for their husbands or other men. One of the more significant platforms for radicalization in the Maldives is via online spaces given Maldives has one of the highest internet use rates in the world. Except for this space women are mostly excluded or absent from physical spaces where extremists use to propagate their views including in meetings after prayers at the mosques, in cafes and in prisons. While the dynamics of family life is constantly in flux, few women felt they had much influence over key decisions.

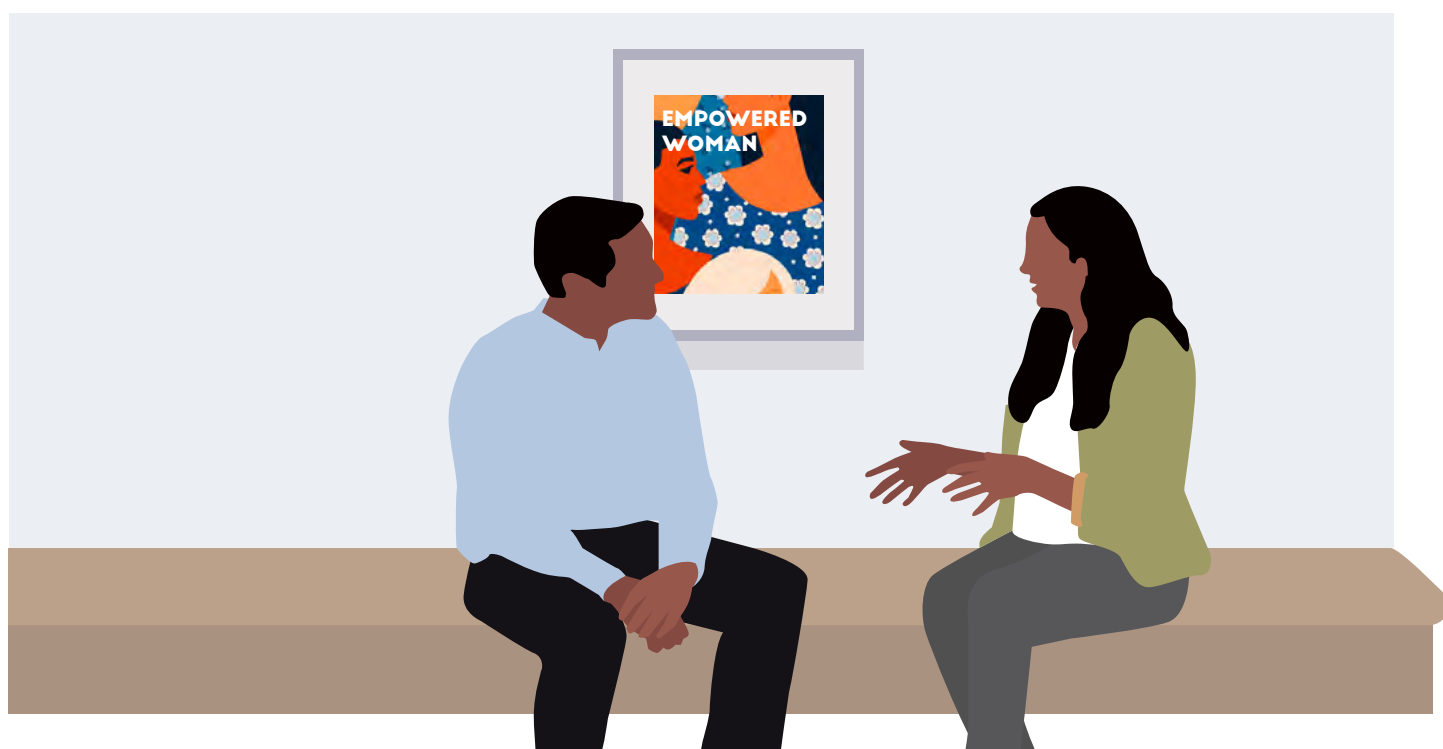
On top of the weakness of the evidence, this approach puts a burden of responsibility onto women and also shifts the emphasis for controlling extremism away from the state into

the private realm. Women are expected to detect signs of radicalization and turn their family around, although they may not be able to do this. Women fear that they will be blamed for extremism that they had no ability to prevent in the first place.

Projects that are tagged with a PVE label also risk being shunned by communities who fear it will lead to stigmatization and intrusive policing. When people, and particularly women, trust the authorities and are engaged with government at all levels, they will act themselves against those who are perceived as harming their societies. But if this is organized into what seems like overbearing monitoring or targeting of religious groups, it will backfire.

Focus on women as broad actors in society rather than just as mothers and wives; there is no evidence that this does anything other than impose undue burdens on them. Women are important actors in community building and their efforts should be given more support, financially and politically.

The empowerment of women has many benefits in a society. It is worth doing for its own ends but it can also have benefits in preventing extremism. Already women have stood up against extremists in the Maldives when they have had the power to do so. They are often more likely to notice patterns of behaviour – withdrawing children from school or preventing them from accessing medical care – that might signal problems. But this only matters if women have a public voice and access to power. It is particularly important that the country facilitate an enabling environment for women. This should include raising the number of women in decision-making positions and in the public sphere to be part of the decision making process, ensuring concerns and voices of women are incorporated as part of the planning and policy process, including those related to PVE. Thus, women may be empowered to act to challenge practices that might lead communities or individuals to violence.



Empowering women – economically, socially and politically – improves the lives of both men and women in communities and potentially boosts their capacities in PVE by giving them a more prominent voice. The first steps are to remove obstacles to their engagement in the public realm.

Allow women a say in the design of programmes. Do not assume they want to do activities apart from men or that they do not want public roles. While in some cases gender-segregated activities may be appropriate, this should not result in the exclusion of women from decision-making.

There are many ways in which women deserve additional help to enable them to prosper despite the structural disadvantages in society; however, it is important to listen to their views on whether they want specific help as women or would rather engage in some broader way alongside men. Where men and women are often segregated in the public sphere, there are benefits on them working together when possible and it is important that women gain a greater public voice. Women-only activities can be useful, and are sometimes preferred, but at the same time this should be because women choose this approach. Where possible a dual approach, rather than one or the other should be adopted. This is also taking into consideration the gendered power relations both at a household and community level.

WOMEN'S LIVES

Women carry a heavy weight of responsibility in the Maldives. They are expected to fulfil traditional roles as mothers, wives and daughters within many constraints set by families and society. Given the high cost of living in the Maldives they must also bring in an income, while being excluded from many areas of the economy, particularly tourism. While traditional roles limit them, they also face some of the more pernicious problems of modern life including divorce and the effects of drug use by men. Most of the women interviewed for this research felt held back in the workplace and were often frustrated by the demands of family life.

While women in public life have shown they can be an important voice for moderation, those who do follow this vocation fight against a strong tide of misogyny and discrimination. Engaging in public life – as an elected official, a judge or senior member of government – often means being criticized extensively on social media and elsewhere. Women who go into electoral politics have difficulties accessing the money and social networks necessary to win; the system is heavily rigged to keep them out. The influence of money in politics works heavily against women, meaning that many who might thrive in public service do not do so. The polarization of Maldivian society has added to the obstacles; the environment has become much more difficult in the past decade even with the opening up of the democratic space

The pressures that apply to women are extensive. Respondents highlighted that at work, they are told they can only succeed by succumbing to sexual harassment. If they do succeed on their own merits, colleagues accuse them of offering sexual favours. Their behaviour and dress is subject to public commentary by strangers. Men dictate how women should live their lives. About half of those we spoke with for this report agreed with the statement that “Women do not feel safe in their homes.” Three-quarters felt that domestic violence was a problem and the government did not do enough about it. More than half either disagreed or refused to comment on the assertion that the police protect women.

All of this signals that women in the Maldives suffer from a high level of structural violence. In other words, the

decisions and actions of the state are such that women do not enjoy a high level of protection. The police, courts and government agencies do not prioritize the interests of women and their security. We see this in the lack of funding and personnel dedicated to protecting women from domestic violence. Changing this is a major challenge in any society, but is particularly difficult in one in which extremism is pushing back. Extremism puts women at risk. From child marriage and rape; reduced access to education and health; and violence, extremism contributes to the shortening and degradation of women's lives.



ENGAGING WOMEN AS PEACEMAKERS



Women in the Maldives have made great strides in education and employment, but at the same time there is a sense of frustration that they are limited by traditional, cultural and social ideas. Approximately eight out of ten women interviewed felt that men held women back and complained about sexual harassment and violence. In interviews, many said that men often dismissed these problems as unimportant, ignoring their effects. Street harassment in Male' is now so prevalent that most women said they were often afraid of walking on their own. About half of those questioned said women did not feel safe in their own homes. One of the key issues that the Maldives must tackle is the behaviour of men in public. Only when women feel less at risk of harassment and violence will they be able to take a full role in the public sphere. For women to become an important force against extremism, they must be shown the full respect and benefits they deserve from the state.

End impunity for men who engage in harassment and take action against those involved in harmful actions against women through the justice system. Ensure that regulations required to facilitate

justice for survivors and victims of harassment and violence are in place and are being implemented. Ensure regular training and sensitization of justice sector personnel. Sensitized and trained personnel are key to ensuring fair and equitable justice for survivors and victims of harassment and violence.

Begin a campaign in the media on the harmful effects of misogyny and street harassment and prepare an educational programme for children and youth to ensure the next generation recognizes that the behaviour is not acceptable.

Begin an examination of the problems of masculinity in the Maldives and consider ways to address this, starting with public servants. Training for men is essential if they are to recognize ways in which gender and misogyny shapes access to public life.

Ensure that women have access to public spaces such as parks and sports facilities by improving policing in these locations and training police to respond effectively rather than dismissing the problem. Women have low levels of faith in the police; they must work to rebuild it by ensuring that officers are trained on these issues. Recruiting more women to the police service should be a priority.

Urgently review the sources of structural violence and address shortfalls in staffing and funding to implement existing laws protecting women and families. Ensure that programmes for vulnerable families and young parents are available to provide support. Fund support activities such as helplines run by civil society organizations.

Extremism is often linked to crime. In the Maldives, this has often centered around drug consumption and sales. Around the world, there is evidence in many cases of young men moving from petty crime to extremism and also of misogyny being connected to support for violent acts.¹ Early help and intervention by social protection agencies and civil society organizations is vital to reduce risks and the long-term human and social costs. Programmes must address problems of male behaviour, not just provide support to women after they have been victims of crime or abuse.

Access to the internet has changed lives in the Maldives, providing links to the world for people who once lived quite isolated lives. But alongside the many benefits have come some problems. Women have benefited from access to virtual public spaces, but they also suffer from intense online abuse. Women in the public eye are particularly vulnerable to campaigns of vilification and even threats of violence. Countries around the world are wrestling with this issue; it requires new methods of monitoring, law enforcement and engagement with social media companies.

End impunity for online harassment and threats. Extremist trolls should be identified and charged under the law if they engage in hate speech or threats. Political leaders must also call out the use of religion for political motives and speak up when women are attacked. Both problems worsen polarization and cheapen politics. Only an open discussion of these issues will dampen down harmful accusations.

Work with social media companies to reduce the amount of extremist content available. Work with NGOs and religious figures to develop sites in Dhivehi language (covering religious content seeking guidance from the Quran and other religious texts on the subject), that people are guided to if they search for extremist content. While this is a difficult process, the online space should not be ceded to extremists and should not be allowed to become a forum for the denigration and exclusion of women.

¹ Dandurand, Y. and Chin, V. (2004) Links between Terrorism and Other Forms of Crime. International Centre for Criminal Law Reform and Criminal Justice Policy. Available at: <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/lbrr/archives/cnmcs-plcng/cn29647-eng.pdf>. Also see Gelfand, M. et al. (2013) Culture and Extremism. Journal of Social Issues. 9 September.

Create online and offline platforms for dialogue with local and international religious experts who share similarities with our culture and situation. Experts who converse with young people, women and the community without judgement and hesitation and guide them to avenues of verified information. What young people and women need are spaces where they can express themselves and not be persecuted for it, but be encouraged and provided with information.

Ensure that there is an expansion of training for women as the government devolves power to islands. Not only do women need support, but there should be additional training for all senior public servants on outer islands to ensure improved delivery of services.

National political leaders must put their influence behind women running for council posts, ensuring that parties provide sufficient funding and support.

Develop a digital literacy program with support from social media companies that encourages the development of skills and critical thinking about online content. This should focus on teenage boys, using channels and language that can reach them.

Establish a mentoring system for both men and women starting out careers in the public service, in which senior or retired officials are brought in to offer support and training.

Develop a comprehensive plan of action for island councils to address extremism and other social issues and ensure that they are aware of ways to tackle issues such as education and public health in a way that most effectively reaches communities who are disengaging from social norms.

Too few women rise to the top of government, the judiciary or business. The government has begun to make changes to this, appointing two women to the Supreme Court and introducing a 33% quota of reserved seats for women in the local councils. This is will be a significant step forward as long as those women are not marginalized in the political environment. Government efforts to devolve power to the outer islands presents an opportunity to expand the role of women in local government.

This research, and previous work on youth vulnerability, found very high levels of dissatisfaction with education in the Maldives. From a lack of availability on outer islands to limits on choice of what is available, many young people, particularly young women, were unhappy with the way education did not prepare them adequately for life or employment. There was significant unhappiness with the quality of religious education. While the country has come a long way in developing universal education and ensuring full literacy, it has now hit a wall that will worsen the risk of a “middle income trap” unless it is tackled. Education lies at the heart of developing a tolerant and open society. Most teachers in the Maldives are women and as mothers they play an essential role in education, while often not having a say in key decisions. Women must be at the centre of a national discussion to consider how education should be structured in the next few decades.

Maldivians should hold a national discussion on education reform, organized in a new way and designed to bring in new voices and opinions. Given the harsh partisan environment, this should be developed in a way that minimizes confrontation. One possibility is to develop a process in which people apply to be part of a discussion council and are then picked on the basis of demographics. The council would represent the wider make-up of the country, rather than political parties, and be selected from the list at random while representing the make-up of the country in terms of gender, geography, age, education etc. This council would then hold sessions with the public and experts to develop a plan of action on the future of education.

Opportunities need to be increased on modes of education for women outside Male’, with considerations into expanding digital learning opportunities etc. This can also increase choices for girls and young women in choosing diverse careers and venture into areas of STEM.

Maldivians are deeply dissatisfied with the quality of religious education available in schools. Many blame the rise of extremism on this failure. Many women in this study said people were poorly educated in religious matters and therefore are inclined to seek guidance from the few personalities/sheiks who are available on and dominate the social media space.

Use the national dialogue to have a discussion on reviewing and improving the current religious education curriculum. There is widespread dissatisfaction with the current system, which many believe does not give sufficient space for critical discussion. Religious education has been ceded to personalities who are most social media savvy, rather than Sheikhs who are best qualified by education and expertise, to advise people. By convening a national dialogue, there is a greater possibility of effectively engaging the public and religious leaders to enable for inclusive, constructive feedback and critical discussions on how the religious education curriculum can be enhanced.

Education reform is a time-consuming process and can take decades to implement and show results. The country needs to consider how it can meet current and future demands, reduce the job skills gap, improve digital skills and literacy and ensure better employment opportunities. It also needs to consider such issues as extremism, gender equality, drug use, religion and national identity in any reform process.

To be fully engaged in the public sphere, women need full access to political life, justice and the economy. The Maldives still falls short in many ways. While the largest sector of the economy is tourism, very few women are employed at resorts. From the start of tourism some four decades ago, it has been developed in a way that has kept it isolated from society. Tourists have limited to no engagement with the residents of the country. Therefore, there have been few opportunities for the coming together of cultures. And this has constructed the idea that resorts are unsuitable places for locals, and more specifically women, to work. Resorts have been unable to provide opportunities for women or solutions to adapting to local conditions: they provide limited secure housing; have there been few efforts made to provide housing or transport to communities near resorts to allow employees to live at home on populated islands and limited efforts to improve the image of the industry

Tourism in the Maldives follows the pattern of large-scale industries around the globe. They provide tax revenues and bring in foreign investments which contribute greatly to the economic development of the country, with the unfortunate downside of limited good jobs for the locals and raising of the value of the currency, resulting in higher prices for imported goods and unfortunate and unexpected environmental impact on the islands. Sadly, some resort owners and operators have not always acted in the best interest of the wider community.

Much effort still needs to be made in the way of encouraging local people to apply for employment in the tourism industry including managerial and skills-based positions for which many Maldivians are qualified. Opportunities also need to be created for those that are interested in working in the industry, but lack the skills and experience. Apprenticeship and training opportunities can be part of the corporate social responsibility or corporate responsibility programmes of the resorts implemented together with the state or local NGOs to contribute towards

achieving decent work and sustainable economic growth in the Maldives. This, together with the implementation of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing ‘Protect, Respect and Remedy’ Framework, can provide a chance for women to flourish.

Establish a commission of government officials, resort owners and managers to determine ways to bring more women into the sector, either by expanding opportunities in resorts or expanding ways in which women can contribute by growing food or providing other services from their home islands.

The tourism sector needs to find more innovative and sustainable ways to support economic growth, reduce and mitigate environmental harm and improve opportunities, particularly for women in local communities. The sector needs to work on stereotypes surrounding the industry and do more to provide training and support for women. By engaging more closely with nearby residents, offering more training and better opportunities, and by providing housing and transport that allows more people to commute to jobs, they could provide sustainable benefits for the country.

Establish a National Council on Sustainable Tourism bringing together government, civil society and the industry to examine ways to ensure all resorts play a role in helping local communities and protecting the environment.

Using this National Council, develop a plan to expand the number of jobs at all levels of the tourism industry to be occupied by Maldivians and particularly by women. Work to establish the country as a global centre for expertise and education on sustainable and socially responsible tourism.

CONCLUSION

For women to play a full role in society, they must have access to positions of power and influence, as well as the freedom to make their own choices about work, family life and their public roles. That requires changes in the attitudes and behaviour of the wider society and leadership from those who currently occupy positions at the top of government and the private sector. Only through their action, will women be able to shrug off some of the burdens that currently hold them back. For the Maldives to be a tolerant, democratic and open society that respects human rights and provides all its citizens with opportunities, these are essential steps. Without greater efforts to move towards gender equality in the public sphere and in the workplace, economic, political and social advances will be limited.

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