POSITION PAPER
WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC LIFE IN THE MALDIVES

Uthema in collaboration with the Delegation of the European Union to Sri Lanka and the Maldives, with the advocacy support of Women Deliver 2019 global conference on gender equality, held a panel discussion in Malé City, Maldives, on 25 April 2019. The focus of the discussion was gender equality issues in the Maldives context with specific emphasis on women’s participation in public life and decision-making. The panel was led by four Maldivian women’s rights advocates with significant experience of developmental issues of socio-cultural, political, economic and legal significance.

1 - INTRODUCTION
In order to capture some of the gender equality gaps in the Maldives, a series of short video clips were produced in preparation for the panel discussion event. These were publicly disseminated using Uthema social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube channels. Some of the highlighted gaps include the following facts.

• In the April 2019 People’s Majlis elections, just 4 out of 87 seats (4.6% women, 95.4% men) were occupied by women in the legislature.

• This is a record low from 14% in 2000 with a widening gap at each subsequent election, with 6.5% in 2009 and 5.9% in 2014.

• The incumbent cabinet shows an improvement from the past, with 7 out of 20 cabinet posts occupied by women, at 35% representation. In the last administration, 3 out of 14 cabinet members (21%) were women.

• Among the incumbent elected local councillors, just 4% are women and 96% are men.

• Among police officers, only 1 in 10 are women.

• According to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016, men on average earn 20% more than women.

• HIES 2016 also shows that working men spend an average of 3 hours doing household chores while working women spend 6 hours.

• Just 8 out of 195 currently sitting judges/magistrates are women, with gender representation at 4% women and 96% men.

These facts and many similar other realities cohere to keep women out of public life and decision-making in the patriarchal context of the Maldives.
Notably, the above facts and realities are contested with a societal narrative suggesting women have “equal opportunities” to participate in public life, with “no legal barriers” obstructing equal access. The legal framework supporting non-discrimination on the basis of gender and the promotion of gender equality remain firmly on paper from Constitutional to lower levels of law and policy.¹

The passage of the Gender Equality Act in 2016 has seen no systemic change in practice.² This stands in stark contrast to the persistent reality that women are considered the primary duty-bearers and carers for children as well as the elderly and infirm, with a disproportionately significant burden of unpaid care-work.³

As noted earlier, HIES 2016 observed that women spend twice as much time (6 hours) as men (3 hours) on household work. Women in the Maldives have always had, and continue to bear income earning responsibility in the prevailing socio-economic context, where the cost of living, especially in the capital Malé, cannot be managed with a single income. Therefore, the multiple burdens of reproductive, care-work, household work and productive work on a daily basis are the domains of women, which remain systemically and socially unacknowledged and under-valued.

To date there are no affordable day care facilities for women to remain in the labour force, forcing women to opt out from public life altogether after starting a family. This is compounded by the fact that policy changes have not kept up with significant changes to the traditional family unit and housing arrangements. Family life has transitioned from rent-free communal living in family plots with extended family, to small rented apartments occupied by the nuclear family in an environment of unregulated tenancy arrangements in a landlord’s market. Women are at a disadvantage in land ownership as evident from the 2006 Census, which showed a notable gender disparity of 31.3% women and 65.5% men.⁴

Anecdotal evidence suggests that significant barriers exist for women to return to work after maternity leave, where
women’s jobs and prospects for career progression are compromised due to the leave of absence to start a family. Nevertheless, such issues remain below the radar of policy-makers, unscrutinised and unaddressed.

The Sexual Harassment Prevention Act 16/2014 was ratified in May 2014. While prevalence of sexual harassment against women in the workplace remain commonplace in the Maldives, redress for those victimised remain elusive undermining workplace safety and security for women.

Although there is no formal study conducted to assess prevalence, there has been several unresolved high profile cases of sexual harassment in the workplace involving serious allegations against public officials.\(^5\)\(^6\)

Seven years since ratification, the Domestic Violence Prevention Act 2012 remains similarly ineffective, with no redress evident in the most serious cases. In March 2019, the Criminal Court acquitted the husband of the late Ziyada Naeem, who was accused of marital rape causing grievous injury that resulted in her death in December 2015.\(^7\)

These realities indicate the challenges and limitations to implementing laws and the continued lack of progress toward meaningful change to the de facto situation of women.

Women are also financially disadvantaged in the social context where divorce rates are high and systemic measures for child maintenance are dysfunctional with access to justice a key concern of women, increasing their exposure to vulnerability and poverty.\(^8\)

The introduction of the single parent allowance is a token cash transfer, which is inadequate to replace access to gainful employment and a dignified quality of life free from financial dependency on the State or any other source.
Furthermore, societal expectations and stereotyping of the gendered roles of men and women indirectly and covertly undermine the ability of women to access alleged “equal opportunities”. Structural barriers to participate in public life exist with a near complete absence of childcare facilities to enable women to attain and sustain themselves in stable employment to maintain financial independence. Most recent data shows that 42% of the over 15 year population is “outside the labour force”, of which 72% are women and 28% are men. The Maldives has a high youth demographic with 31% of the population falling into the 18-35 age cohort. In this cohort, 39% of women and 17% men are not engaged in employment, education or training activities.

The work women do to supplement household income in the insecure and tenuous informal sector without paid leave or pension, remain unacknowledged within society and at policy level. This is also an area where data poverty is acute. The prevailing trend for unsustainable development practices favouring large infrastructure projects such as airports and city hotels are causing significant environmental damage to island ecosystems, consuming scarce and finite natural resources on a scale that is completely undermining and eroding the sustainable traditional livelihoods of rural women, exposing them to poverty.

Institutionalisation of social protection benefits including pensions favour those employed in the formal sector, which result in the exclusion of women by default. In 2018, contributors to the government retirement pension scheme consisted 33% women and 67% men. Accord-
ing to HIES 2016, the “preferred work” of women is home-based, manual work while men prefer technical and professional jobs in the government. This observation does not align with the fact that the civil service, which is the largest employer, constitutes 55.6% women.

Notably, with women holding the majority of civil service jobs, they constitute the largest number earning the lowest wages. According to data cited by the Chief Statistician of the National Bureau of Statistics, only 2% of civil service employees earn wages above MVR 15,000 (USD 972), which is approximately the cost of rent for a simple two-bedroom apartment in Malé City at current rates. With 5% earning above MVR 10,000 (USD 648), the vast majority of civil servants earn a monthly salary below MVR 5,000 (USD 324).

Women’s lived realities stand in stark contrast to the general perception that women simply do not participate in public life despite the perceived opportunities available to them. What remains unacknowledged in this narrative is the overt absence of an enabling environment for women to participate in public life, structurally by the absence of implementation of laws, and socially through accepted traditional norms, practices and perceptions of the gendered role of women as carers and housekeepers. A common comparison made by policy makers is that Maldivian women are the “most emancipated in South Asia”. This is a non-sequitur considering the context, developmental trajectory and the regression Maldivian women have experienced over the past decades, in terms of their social, cultural, economic and political participation in public life in recent history. For instance, the labour force participation rate of women in the Maldives stood at 75% in 1970, which had dramatically declined to 47.6% in 2014 with a continuing downward trend in 2016, to 42%.

The transition to democratic governance with multi-party democracy has seen a level of instability and volatility in
the political environment in which, grassroots political participation of women as frontline activists, often more so than men, have become increasingly visible and recognised. However, it is evident within the hierarchy of political parties that the opportunity for women to occupy decision-making positions remain remote.\textsuperscript{17} While some parties have reserved seats for women which can be interpreted as tokenistic to include preferred candidates, others do not recognise a need for it despite the existence of significant gender disparities. Therefore, a policy recommendation submitted to the current government by Uthema and Voice of Women in 2018 is for political parties to ensure that the decision-making levels are representative of the gender representation of party membership.\textsuperscript{18}

Policy-makers and some senior members of the civil service consider the situation of women in Maldives to be “the best in South Asia”. This comparison, however, has no bearing in the country context where the above data and analysis provides the paradoxes of persistent discrimination, disempowerment and gender-based exclusion of women. Moreover, when the historical context is taken into account, economic and political participation of women has steadily declined over the past several decades. The situation requires robust policy interventions that must ensure remedies are introduced and effectively implemented to bridge the significant gender gaps, to ensure de facto equality and equity is realised to improve the lived realities of women in the Maldives.

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\textbf{Artwork credit: Student Art Exhibition by Billabong School, Male’ and UN Women, IWD2017}
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The present government of Maldives under the leadership of President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih has notably declared its commitment to address prevailing issues of gender based discrimination and inequality. On the occasion of International Women’s Day 2019, President Solih announced the government’s decision to implement 6 months paid maternity leave and 1 month paid paternity leave to civil service employees.\textsuperscript{19,20} This policy decision is a positive step that will have a transformative and beneficial impact on women, newborn children and families. This decision and its implementation has resulted in a ripple effect whereby other sectors have begun to follow the government’s example. On 23 April 2019, the government submitted an amendment to the Decentralisation Act, proposing the adoption of 33% quota for women in local councils.\textsuperscript{21} This is an unprecedented development in the Maldives where, to date, the allocation of gender quota as a temporary special measure has been rejected by the People’s Majlis despite the evidence for its effectiveness.\textsuperscript{22} The proposed amendment will be discussed when the 19th People’s Majlis commences on 28 May 2019.
The following recommendations are made to relevant key stakeholders including the Civil Service Commission, the Government, People’s Majlis, the Judiciary, civil society actors, individual change-makers and influencers advocating for gender equality and democratic good governance in the Maldives. These recommendations reiterate policy proposals submitted to the joint-coalition manifesto in September 2018 (see footnote 18).

a) conduct awareness raising activities by technical officials of the Civil Service to familiarise policy decision-makers on the available evidence-base on socio-economic development indicators, to support evidence-based policy decision-making to achieve tangible and meaningful change addressing gaps

b) conduct need assessment, develop the necessary human resource base and allocate adequate funds to implement the provisions of laws promoting a safe, equitable and stable society, such as the Domestic Violence Prevention Act 3/2012, the Sexual Harassment Prevention Act 16/2014 and the Gender Equality Act 18/2016, with specific emphasis on identifying discriminatory practices that exclude women’s participation in all areas of social, economic, cultural and political life, and address them to initiate tangible and real results to improve the de facto situation of women

c) establish safe and affordable child-care facilities, starting with services for civil servants and State owned enterprises in order to develop a best-practice model that can be replicated by other sectors

d) amend the Political Parties Act 4/2013 to include provision(s) to improve the internal governance of political parties and facilitate fair and democratic representation of party members by gender in decision-making and leadership positions

e) Civil Service Commission to investigate the phenomenon of more women in low-wage and middle management positions yet fewer women in executive positions of the civil service, to address the existing gender imbalance in decision-making positions

f) establish social security net for home-based workers and the disproportionate numbers of women in insecure work, recognising and valuing their contribution to the economy

g) reverse the prevailing trend towards environmentally destructive, unsustainable development practices by supporting, safeguarding, preserving and promoting sustainable traditional livelihoods and income generating activities of rural women, who depend on finite community based natural assets
1. Non-discrimination clause in the Constitution 2008, Article 17; Gender Equality Act, 18/2016


3. Qualitative Assessment: Perceptions about women’s participation in public life in the Maldives, IFES, 2015

4. Women in Public Life: Situational Analysis/Baseline Assessment, August 2010, UNDP Maldives


10. Ibid


14. Data cited by Chief Statistician Aishath Shahuda via Twitter @AishathShahuda (03 May 2019)


17. Qualitative Assessment: Perceptions about women’s participation in public life in the Maldives, IFES, 2015


