



**Comprehensive national-level review on the  
implementation of the Beijing Declaration and  
Platform for Action (Beijing +30 Review)**

1 June 2024

**Ministry of Social and Family Development  
Republic of Maldives**

## **List of Abbreviations**

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AGO	Attorney General's Office
BCC	Business Center Corporation
BPfA	Beijing Platform for Action
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
CBDRM	Community-Based Disaster Risk Management
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
CERT	Community Emergency Response Team
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRPA	Child Rights Protection Act (Law No. 19/2019)
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
DJA	Department of Judicial Administration
DRM	Disaster Risk Management
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
DV	Domestic Violence
DVPA	Domestic Violence Prevention Act (Law No. 3/2012)
DVPNS	Domestic Violence Prevention National Strategy
FCSC	Family and Children Service Centre
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
FPA	Family Protection Authority
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEA	Gender Equality Act (Law No. 18/2016)
GEAP	Gender Equality Action Plan
GMA	Greater Male' Area
GRB	Gender-Responsive Budgeting
GST	Goods and Services Tax
HIES	Household Income and Expenditure Survey
HPA	Health Protection Agency
HRCM	Human Rights Commission of the Maldives
IGMH	Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
JSC	Judicial Service Commission
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LFPR	Labour Force Participation Rate
LGA	Local Government Authority
MBC	Maldives Broadcasting Commission
MBS	Maldives Bureau of Statistics
MEERY	Maldives: Enhancing Employability and Resilience of Youth
MGEM	Maldivian Gender Equality Model
MJA	Maldives Journalists Association

MMC	Maldives Media Council
MNDF	Maldives National Defence Force
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoF	Ministry of Finance
MoGFSS	Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services
MoH	Ministry of Health
MoHELSD	Ministry of Higher Education, Labour and Skills Development
MoSFD	Ministry of Social and Family Development
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MPAO	Maldives Pension Administration Office
MPI	Multidimensional Poverty Index
MPS	Maldives Police Service
MP	Member of Parliament
MSS	Maldivian Statistical System
MVR	Maldivian Rufiyaa
NAP	National Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
NCIT	National Centre for Information Technology
NCTC	National Counter Terrorism Centre
NDMA	National Disaster Management Authority
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NMRF	National Monitoring and Reporting Framework
NPI	New Policy Initiatives
NSDS	National Strategy on Development of Statistics
NSPA	National Social Protection Agency
NWM	National Women's Machinery
PGO	Prosecutor General's Office
PHC	Primary Healthcare
PSAH	Prevention of Sexual Abuse and Harassment
PSAHA	Prevention of Sexual Abuse and Harassment Act (Law No. 16/2014)
PSM	Public Service Media
PWD	Person with Disability
RGA	Rapid Gender Assessment
RTL	Raajje Transport Link
SAILS	Sustainable and Integrated Labour Services
SAP	Strategic Action Plan
SDFC	SME Development Finance Corporation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SGII	Strengthening Gender Inclusive Initiatives
SME	Small and Medium Enterprise
SOA	Sexual Offences Act (Law No. 17/2014)
SOE	State-Owned Enterprise
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

TGST	Tourism Goods and Services Tax
TiP	Trafficking in Persons
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
VAW	Violence Against Women
WDC	Women's Development Committee

## **Section One: Highlights**

This report is developed as part of the country-level review on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) in the Maldives, in conjunction with the upcoming 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Beijing Declaration. The national review was led and conducted by the national women's machinery, the Gender Affairs Department of the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MoSFD), with majority of the review being conducted in May 2024. The ministry initiated a consultative process, through identification of key stakeholders with mandates assigned to them under various policies and action plans which contribute to gender equality outcomes. The review further included consultations with non-government organisations, including CSOs who promote women's rights and gender equality, worker's associations and service providers.

Across the 12 critical areas of concern under focus within the review, there have generally been good progress observed across the various themes. This includes legislative and policy instruments which have been introduced or amended to further the rights of women and girls, one of which is the launching of the national Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) in 2022. Over the past five years, an overarching priority has been given to bridge gaps in accessibility of services due to the geographical dispersion of the Maldives. As a result, there have been significant improvements in accessing and generating equitable outcomes across various areas such as health, education, and employment. While the COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant setbacks and challenges, particularly within the economy, the paradigm shift brought about as a result has had positive impacts on service delivery and equitable access

The review also indicates that the past five years has seen a more inclusive approach across policymaking, which takes into consideration the needs of marginalised groups and intersecting identities. This includes special provisions made for women with disabilities such as in financial credit schemes, expansion of support and benefits for older persons and persons with disabilities, and integration of gender perspectives in policies and action plans focused on persons with disabilities (PWDs) and the elderly, as well as focused interventions for migrant workers.

However, the review also highlights several gaps in the implementation of the BPfA and overall gender equality objectives of the Maldives. One key consistent challenge is limited financial and budgetary support and human resources for the purposes of mainstreaming gender, and efficiently monitoring gender equality outcomes. Another major issue is the lack of quality sex-disaggregated data, which hinders efforts to build an evidence base to carry out advocacy as well as develop data-backed policies. The review further highlights that, while a number of priority actions within national action plans and policies heavily align with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Agenda, gaps persist in collecting, maintaining and using gender data for the purpose of monitoring implementation.

Throughout this review process, a number of areas in which Maldives can continue to carry out good practices have been identified, along with areas in which further focus and support is needed.

## **Section Two: Priorities, achievements, challenges and setbacks**

### **1. Over the past five years, what have been the most important achievements, challenges and setbacks in progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women?**

The Maldives has achieved considerable progress towards attaining gender equality and women empowerment in the past five years. The progress made is demonstrated through the improvement in the Maldives' Global Gender Gap Index score from 0.646 in 2020 to 0.649 in 2023, with near-parity scores in health and survival and educational attainment. There has additionally been a decrease in the Gender Inequality Index (GII), with the score declining from 0.336 in 2019 to 0.238 in 2022, per the latest Human Development Report by UNDP. There has thus been a positive shift in the Maldives in terms of gender equality outcomes.

Much of the progress made can be attributed to greater prioritisation of gender equality initiatives and mainstreaming at an institutional and national level, including the adoption of key policies and action plans on gender equality. One of the most significant achievements in progressing towards gender equality and the empowerment of women is the adoption of the National Gender Policy in 2019 and the subsequent roll-out of the five-year national Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP), which is to be implemented from 2022 to 2026. The GEAP presents an opportunity for the government to streamline and accelerate efforts to attain gender equality, with an overarching goal of gender mainstreaming. The introduction of a national level policy and action plan on gender equality signals the government's commitment to integrate gender equality as a priority across the whole government and policymaking.

The Strategic Action Plan (SAP) of the previous administration, implemented from 2019 to 2023, further emphasised the priority given to gender equality, which was included as a sub-sector under governance. Gender equality remains a continuing priority of the current administration, which assumed office in November 2023, with several key pledges embedded within the new government's manifesto and the incorporation of gender equality as an important sub-sector within its Strategic Action Plan, which is currently under development.

Maldives' commitment to gender equality is further demonstrated by progress made in fulfilling obligations under international conventions such as the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In February 2020, the Maldives lifted its reservations to sections (b), (e), (g), and (h) of Part 1 as well as Part 2 of Article 16 under CEDAW. Part 2 of Article 16 states that child marriage or betrothal will not be legally recognised and that the state will set a minimum age of marriage.

As per this obligation, Maldives had set the minimum age of marriage at 18 years old, via the enactment of the Child Rights Protection Act (Law No. 19/2019) in November 2019; prior to this legislative change, the definition of a child was inconsistent within the law, and marriages could be performed for children aged 16 and above, provided there was parental consent.

Other landmark changes were brought to legislation to further the protection of women's rights, particularly to address gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against women (VAW). In 2021, a legislative amendment brought to the Sexual Offences Act (Law No. 17/2014) re-defined the offences of rape, sexual injury, and sexual assault to extend to married couples, unconditionally recognising marital rape as a crime. The amendment to the Sexual Offences

Act (SOA) also further promotes a victim-centred and trauma-informed approach, via training staff at health facilities, and mandates the provision and use of rape evidence kits in sexual offence cases.

The Maldives has also seen considerable achievements, in the past five years, in terms of women's role in public life and decision-making. Strong legislative amendments have brought about landmark changes, such as the introduction of a 33% electoral quota for women in island and city councils through the amendment to the Decentralisation Act in 2019. In 2021, following the first Local Council elections held after the amendment, 39.5% of the local council seats were held by women, a marked improvement from the trend observed during the preceding three local council terms, with only 6% of local councillors being women in the most recent term from 2017 to 2021. At present, following by-elections held during the present term, 39.7% of local councillors are women, with the election of the first female atoll council president in 2023.

Within the current review period, women ministers were appointed for the first time to hold ministerial portfolios in non-traditional areas such as defence, urban development and housing, environment and energy, technology, and transport. At present, 38% (5 out of 13) of heads of diplomatic missions are women, indicating that women play a key role in diplomacy and in representing the Maldives at an international level.

In 2019, two female justices were appointed to the Supreme Court for the first time, marking a milestone as women were now represented at the highest tier of the judiciary. The judiciary as a whole has seen significant progress, with the proportion of female judges quadrupling from 4% (8 female judges out of 195 total judges) in May 2019 to 16% (30 female judges out of 184 total judges) in May 2024. Women are currently represented at every level of the judiciary, including all superior courts, with the exception of the Drug Court. In addition to the increased representation of women in the judiciary, the judiciary has taken significant measures to create greater sensitivity amongst judges as means to ensure greater access to justice for women, including trainings on GBV related laws and gender sensitisation sessions, both incorporated within specialised in-depth trainings and induction programs for new judges. There have also been greater efforts to enhance dialogue and visibility around women's participation in the judiciary, with the very first Women Judges' Conference being held in 2023, followed by a second conference in 2024. There has generally been a very positive shift towards women's participation in the judiciary within the past five years, which indicates overall progress in promoting women's role in public life.

Despite these progressive steps, there remain persistent challenges in attaining gender equality and women empowerment in the Maldives. Although the increase in women's representation in local governance and the judiciary are positive indicators, women's representation remains lacking in the highest levels of governance. While the 2008 Constitution removed any legal barriers for women to contest for the highest political office in the nation, no woman has yet assumed the role of head of state, nor has any woman contested for the presidency in the history of the country. Women are severely underrepresented at the Parliament, with a trend of decreasing numbers of women parliamentarians over the last electoral cycles. In 2019, only 4 out of 85 (4.6%) Members of Parliament (MPs) were women; following the election in April

2024, with MPs for the 20th tenure of the Parliament assuming office in May 2024, only 3 (3.2%) out of 93 MPs are women.

While the Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) sets out a goal of at least 33% women in the Parliament by 2026, with planned activities including introduction of temporary special measures such as legislative quotas, internal party mechanisms, and financial incentives for parties, the current figures present a significant setback in attaining these goals. Although efforts were made to devise lobbying strategies and map out activities to bring about legislative changes to ensure a greater representation of women at the Parliament, there were several constraints which delayed the implementation timeline of these activities. These include lack of available funding from the national budget for activities such as consultancies, lack of technical capacity within the national women's machinery, lack of support and cooperation from stakeholders such as political parties required to carry out dialogue on the issue.

The Maldives also continues to face challenges in accelerating gender equality outcomes within the economy. Economic participation and opportunities has persistently remained one of the areas in which the Maldives performs poorly in indices such as the Global Gender Gap Index and the Gender Inequality Index. While Maldives' score in the economic participation and opportunities index in the Global Gender Gap report was at 0.518 in 2020, it declined to 0.491 in 2021 and increased again to 0.531 in 2022, indicating some progress in this area. However, there was a slight decline in the score in 2023, to 0.512. The fluctuations in these scores appear mostly due to changes in the estimated income levels between men and women. The Maldives has a significant gender pay gap, with the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) from 2019 indicating that employed women earn an average of MVR 7,995 compared to monthly average income of MVR 12,169 for men. Additionally, while the Population and Housing Census from 2022 indicates a slight increase in women's labour force participation rate (LFPR) in 2022, at 48.4% compared to 45.6% in 2019, these figures still indicate very slow progress, especially considering the discrepancy between women's LFPR and men's LFPR, which is at 79.5%.

There is also substantial occupational segregation within the economy, as demonstrated in the low level of women workers in the largest economic sector of the country, tourism, where only 11% of the workforce (3% Maldivian women) are women<sup>1</sup>. Women continue to face barriers to employment, including childcare and domestic work burden, social norms which perpetuate occupational segregation, workplace harassment and gender discriminatory practices by employers. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic further widened the gender gap in the economy, placing women in a more vulnerable position. Concerns about women's low engagement in the workforce and unfavourable economic outcomes are further compounded when considering that women have comparatively higher levels and rates of educational attainment compared to men. There is thus a greater need for concentrated efforts to address barriers in transitioning into the workforce.

At present, one of the greatest challenges in attaining gender equality outcomes across various sectors remain the lack of gender mainstreaming. While the introduction of the GEAP has the

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<sup>1</sup> Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2023). An insightful analysis of resort employment in the Maldives.



overarching aim of mainstreaming gender across the government, there remain limitations in capacity and understanding of gender within state actors. There is still a general perception that gender equality initiatives are only within the mandate or responsibilities of the national women's machinery (NWM), and a lack of ownership amongst other state agencies. While there has been an increase in efforts to work within the state to establish a network for interagency coordination, through the introduction of the Maldivian Gender Equality Model (MGEM) and nomination of MGEM advocates across state institutions to lead gender mainstreaming within government agencies, an observed lack of understanding of gender and the necessity for integration of gender perspectives in their area of work, suggests a need for more intensive targeted advocacy and capacity-building.

One significant initiative launched in the past five years to significantly accelerate gender mainstreaming is the 5-year Strengthening Gender Inclusive Initiatives (SGII) project, supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Initiated in 2022, this project aims to increase access to sustainable gender responsive social services in the Maldives by promoting Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI). The main objectives of the project include strengthening the use of GESI statistics, piloting gender-responsive budgeting in selected ministries, increasing capacity of social service system for aged care and childcare as well as services for victims of GBV and domestic violence (DV), including promoting partnerships to provide services for these areas and establishment of DV/GBV shelters.

As part of the efforts to institutionalise gender mainstreaming, great focus has been maintained on generating and promoting the use of gender statistics. An assessment conducted in 2019 on gender statistics in the Maldives identified key producers and users of gender data, and existent gaps in data. Following the enactment of the Statistics Act in 2020, the Maldives Bureau of Statistics introduced a gender-responsive National Strategy for Development of Statistics and are presently carrying out a survey on gender data use, which will allow for greater understanding of how gender statistics can be produced and used for policy-making. The work carried out under SGII will further complement gender statistics usage in the Maldives.

Another area which has presented a significant challenge in generating gender equality outcomes over the past five years is the need for a more robust legislative framework to ensure greater compliance. While the legislative framework for gender equality in the Maldives is relatively strong, with no de jure barriers to women's participation in social, economic or public life, there has also been an increasing need for legislative reforms to the existing framework to enhance the implementation of and ensure meaningful outcomes. This includes a review of the Gender Equality Act (Law No. 18/2016), the Family Act (Law No. 4/2000), the Prevention of Sexual Abuse and Harassment Act (Law No. 16/2014), and the Domestic Violence Prevention Act (Law No. 3/2012). However, while there have been efforts made over the past five years to review all of these laws, no comprehensive review of any of the aforementioned laws has yet been concluded, with prevailing issues in implementing the laws due to legislative gaps being a significant challenge to generate gender equality outcomes.

As observed across the globe, COVID-19 too posed significant challenges and exacerbated existing gender gaps in the Maldives, including significant disruptions to the economy, labour market, education, and healthcare access. However, the government took robust measures

which mitigated a majority of the challenges faced, and even expanded on the paradigm shift brought about to sustain positive measures. The following sections in this report expand significantly on these mitigation tactics.

Over the past five years, there has also been an observed trend of increasing conservatism which has had adverse impact on those advocating for gender equality and women empowerment. This has manifested in the form of harassment against CSOs and agencies who promote gender equality, propagation of negative narratives around women's role being confined to the private or domestic sphere and in a subjugated role, as well as concerning perpetuation of beliefs which promote or justify GBV for VAW, including practices such as female genital mutilation.

Despite challenges created by both systemic gaps as well as crises such as COVID-19, the past five years has generally seen favourable outcomes for women and gender equality, including greater representation of women in public life, improvements in terms of economic opportunities, greater access to healthcare and education and support services to address gender-based violence.

## **2. Over the past five years, what have been the top five priorities for accelerating progress for women and girls in your country through laws, policies and/or programmes?**

The government has made significant efforts to strengthen and streamline gender mainstreaming efforts in the Maldives over the past five years. Following the ratification of the Gender Equality Act (Law No. 18/2016) in 2016, there has been significant structural changes brought to the government apparatus, in an effort to institutionalise gender mainstreaming. This has been enacted through the adoption of a National Gender Policy in September 2019 and the subsequent enforcement and roll-out of the national Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) in 2022. The National Gender Policy outlines 5 policy goals or focus areas under which gender equality initiatives of the government will be prioritised: Leadership and Governance, Economic Empowerment, Institutional Gender Mainstreaming, Elimination of Gender-Based Violence, and Access to Justice. The GEAP, which was endorsed by the Ministerial Cabinet in February 2022 and rolled out in March the same year, outlines actions under these five key priority areas, with a planned implementation period of five years, until 2026. These five policy goals broadly address priority areas to accelerate gender equality initiatives in the Maldives.

As observed in the Maldives' parity score across the past five years for the Global Gender Gap Index, the two areas where scores persistently remain low are political empowerment and economic participation and opportunities; these are some of the focus areas which Policy Goal 1 (Leadership and Governance) and Policy Goal 2 (Economic Empowerment) of the GEAP address. In particular, there is great focus under Leadership and Governance to increase representation of women in legislature at the Parliament; this is one of the biggest priorities for the government, in consideration of the present low levels of representation. There are also actions aimed at further enhancing women's meaningful participation in local governance as well as in the judiciary. The interventions under Policy Goal 1 include proposed reviews of legislative instruments such as the Political Parties Act, proposals to introduce internal mechanisms within political parties to both increase women's representation in party governance as well as in the proportion of female candidates backed by political parties in national elections. There are also actions focused on increasing women's leadership within the executive, such as setting targets for political appointees, and increasing women's representation in SOE board of directors, as well as in the law enforcement and security sector such as the police service and defence force. Further, in recognition of the need to bring about positive changes to perception about women's role in public life and in governance, there are interventions focused on increasing awareness amongst the public, monitoring of media portrayal of women, and programmes aimed at developing capacity of women.

These strategies will have broader impact on several areas, including policy-making related to health, educational and economic outcomes and developmental issues being addressed at local level which impact rural women, as well as improved access to justice within the judicial system and more efficient redress mechanisms for violence against women and girls.

As highlighted earlier in this report, one of the key challenges for generating gender quality outcomes as a whole in the Maldives is the persistent gender gap observed in the economy. This includes low level of female LFPR, a high concentration of women within the informal sector, a significant gender pay gap, and occupational segregation. Policy Goal 2 of the GEAP

is focused on Economic Empowerment, and broadly addresses these issues via targeted interventions. Actions under this goal include promoting enabling work environments and flexibilities, further enhancing entrepreneurship opportunities through increased access to finance and skill development, targeted actions to increase women's representation in under-represented areas. In alignment with this, the past five years has seen significantly broader access to finance and training opportunities for women, including the launching of financial products exclusive to women as well as dedicated marketplaces for women entrepreneurs in 2024 alone. Under this policy goal, particular focus is also given to increasing women's representation in the sectors such as fisheries, STEM and tourism sector. This is seen as a priority due to the low level of women engaged in the tourism sector presently, at only 11% (and less than 3% when considering Maldivian women),<sup>2</sup> despite tourism being the largest sector and the greatest contributor to the Maldives' GDP. At present, a study is being undertaken by the World Bank to assess employment of women in the fisheries and tourism sector, which is expected to identify gaps and set out recommendations for policy-makers.

The GEAP identifies elimination of gender-based violence and access to justice as separate policy goals as well. Trends from the past five years indicate an increase in number of reported cases of violence against women. Although these trends cannot capture the true prevalence of VAW, and may in fact suggest that there is simply greater awareness of existing mechanisms to report VAW cases, the rise in reported cases requires strengthening of support services and prevention mechanisms to address VAW. In recognising this need and the currently fragmented nature of support services and mechanisms to address VAW/GBV, there are several activities outlined to further enhance existing mechanisms and inter-agency coordination, as well as broaden services such as establishment of shelters for victims of domestic violence and GBV, expansion of psychosocial support and legal aid services, and enhancement of existing reporting and referral mechanisms. There is also a recognised need to improve access to justice for women, particularly victims of GBV. Statistics from over the past five years indicate that while the number of GBV cases reported continue to increase, the prosecution rate for such cases remains concerningly low, at 3 to 5 percent<sup>3</sup>. This indicates a greater need to revise the existent investigative mechanisms, including identification of any procedural issues which result in cases being unresolved for a lengthy period of time, evidentiary burden and stigmatisation of victims within the system, culture of impunity and legislative gaps.

Additionally, a great need for institutionalisation of gender mainstreaming has been observed in the Maldives. A major challenge in attaining gender equality outcomes, particularly across various cross-cutting sectors, is the lack of priority given to gender mainstreaming or gender-related issues by relevant stakeholders or implementing agencies. Gender mainstreaming is arguably the singular most important area in which resources and policy measures should be focused on, in order to accelerate attainment of gender equality outcomes. To bridge this gap, significant shifts needed to be made to further strengthen the women's machinery and the broader gender architecture within the state. This includes revision of the legislative framework on gender equality and women empowerment, establishing proper inter-agency coordination

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<sup>2</sup> Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2023). An insightful analysis of resort employment in the Maldives.

<sup>3</sup> UNFPA Maldives (2023). Human Rights & Gender Review of Gender-Based Violence Related Laws in the Maldives.

and monitoring mechanisms, ensuring the integration of gender perspectives into policymaking, and gender-responsive budgeting. The GEAP, which has an overarching objective of gender mainstreaming, has a specific policy goal focused on Institutional Gender Mainstreaming, which incorporates these strategies. Over the past five years, and particularly since the roll-out of the GEAP, efforts have been made to restructure the gender architecture of the Maldives and enhance inter-agency coordination. The government has made steps to initiate gender-responsive budgeting, to be piloted in selected ministries in the coming months. Sectoral gender audits were conducted for the health and judicial sectors in 2023, which allows for deeper understanding of the gaps within those sectors and sets out recommendations to bridge these gaps.

The past five years have also seen consistent efforts to bridge the gender gaps that are associated with the geographical dispersion of the country. As a cross-cutting issue across all of the priorities highlighted earlier, there has been significant work done to increase connectivity across the Maldives, either via establishment of infrastructure or mechanisms within the islands or digitalisation. One significant measure taken during the past five years is focusing on decentralisation in various aspects. This includes expansion of infrastructure in the islands, such as the establishment of Business Centres and Job Centres in different regions, the establishment of the RTL network, strengthening the local governance system (with the increase in women's representation at local governments also contributing to positive outcomes), mobilising local councils and Women's Development Committees for community engagement, as well as establishment of community social groups (IBAMA) for prevention and response to social issues. While many of these initiatives were not prioritised as a gendered issue, these measures collectively have contributed to greater social cohesion, an expansion of resources at island level to address issues such as GBV, and greater access to services and opportunities for both men and women.

### **3. Over the past five years, what specific actions have you taken to prevent discrimination and promote the rights of marginalized groups of women and girls?**

Over the past five years, efforts have been made to adopt and integrate an intersectional approach to gendered issues and to address the needs of marginalised groups of women and girls. Particular focus has been given to improving the rights of older women, women with disabilities, migrant women, and women in rural or remote areas.

Given the geographically dispersed nature of the country, the Maldivian population is vastly scattered. As a result, there are inherent barriers to accessing facilities and quality services such as healthcare, education, and economic opportunities due to the mobility constraints. Often, a majority of those residing in outer-lying atolls and more remote islands tend to be women; the 2022 Census indicates that while the sex ratio for the Republic (including administrative as well as industrial islands) is at 104 men to 100 women, the sex ratio in Male' is 99 men to 100 women and even lower in the atolls at 93 men to 100 women. This population dynamic is largely due to social norms and economic factors, such as a majority of men working in sectors such as tourism and fisheries which require being away from home for long period of time, while women tend to remain at home and take on a majority of household and care responsibilities. As a result, it is often women who reside in regions where access to services and industrial activities are less concentrated, or who literally live within the margins of society.

However, over the past five years there have been a number of significant steps taken to break down such barriers and increase mobility. This includes the introduction and expansion of the Raajje Transport Link (RTL) service. As discussed elsewhere in this report, time and labour-saving infrastructure such as this have generally positive outcomes for women. Efforts have also been made to enhance access to services such as quality education and healthcare, through the use of digital platforms such as satellite schooling and telemedicine. There has been ongoing work to increase connectivity across the country, an effort which has accelerated following the COVID-19 pandemic. Details of actions taken to broaden access to services are highlighted in relevant sub-sections under Section Three of this report.

Additionally, efforts have been made to promote the rights of marginalised groups such as elderly women and women with disabilities, including efforts to enhance legislative frameworks on their rights, via development of policies and action plans specific to the elderly and PWDs, as well as expansion of support services. New and continued support services have been provided for the elderly and PWD, including expansion of social protection schemes and allowances for PWDs and their caretakers, furthering employment opportunities for PWDs, establishment of social centres for elderly, and assistance for bedridden people. Increased efforts to ensure accessibility in advocacy and programming has also been observed in nearly all areas reviewed, including specific programs targeted at migrant workers. Details of these initiatives are provided in various other sections of this report.

**4. Over the past five years, how has the confluence of different crises affected the implementation of the BPfA in your country, and what measures have you taken to prevent their negative impact on progress for women and girls?**

Maldives is the lowest-lying country in the world and is especially vulnerable to climate change effects. The effects of climate change and environmental degradation are disproportionately held by women in the Maldives. As mentioned in previous sections of the report, the population in islands outside of Male' is largely comprised of women and children. This often means that it is women who play a key role in disaster risk reduction (DRR) and mitigation efforts for environmental issues that impact the island. The effects of climate change also have a negative impact on women's economic outcomes. A large portion of women who are economically active are informally employed, and of those in informal employment many are engaged in activities that rely on natural resources, such as crafts (e.g. rope-weaving), value-addition activities such as fish processing and food production. To mitigate these gendered impacts, there has been greater integration of gender into environmental projects, as well as DRR management and response (detailed in Question 31 and 32). Additionally, with the substantial increase in women's representation in local governance highlighted earlier, it is expected that women now have greater say in making decisions which impact local development and their livelihoods, including initiatives that affect access to natural resources.

Congruent with global trends, COVID-19 had a disproportionate impact on women and girls in the Maldives as well. A rapid gender assessment (RGA) conducted by the Maldives Bureau of Statistics (MBS) at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown in the Maldives found that women were disproportionately affected in terms of labour market disruption, income loss, mental health, and unpaid care and domestic work<sup>4</sup>.

The RGA found that 54% of women informal workers suffered from reduced income, compared to 40% of men informal workers. The government introduced an income support allowance programme in May 2020, with particular focus on reaching out to those who are self-employed and informally employed. However, despite women facing greater income loss compared to men, there were fewer women receiving support compared to men at the initial stage of this program; this is largely because women in the informal sector did not meet the eligibility criteria as they did not have registration or supporting documents. To mitigate this, adjustments were made to the application process including the documentation required, to increase access to support for women who may not have substantial formalised documents on their income sources. As a result, the proportion of women receiving income support via the programme increased from 22%<sup>5</sup> in the initial phase to 36% in March 2021<sup>6</sup>.

A study on GBV during COVID-19, conducted by UNFPA, also highlights that COVID-19 further exacerbated violence against women,<sup>7</sup> as indicated by the increase in reported cases

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<sup>4</sup> Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2020). Gender-Differentiated Consequences of COVID-19 on women's and men's economic empowerment in the Maldives.

<sup>5</sup> UNDP Maldives (2020). Rapid Livelihood Assessment: Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis in the Maldives.

<sup>6</sup> Based on statistics maintained by Ministry of Economic Development and Trade

<sup>7</sup> UNFPA Maldives (2021). Gender-based violence during covid-19 pandemic in the Maldives: an analysis of reported cases.

following the lockdown. In recognising the need for stronger reporting mechanisms and support services, there were measures introduced such as the introduction of the 1421 helpline and the launching of the *Geveshi Gulhun* campaign, which focuses on tackling domestic violence and strengthening domestic relationships.

It is of note that a number of measures taken to mitigate crises including COVID-19 and the climate crisis, have been sustained and expanded on, to further gender equality outcomes.



## **5. Over the next five years, what are the priorities for accelerating progress for women and girls in your country through laws, policies and/or programmes?**

Over the next five years, the government aims to significantly advance the efforts towards gender equality and promoting women's meaningful participation in all aspects of public life. The government's efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) are complemented by the manifesto of President Dr. Mohammed Muizzu which strongly focuses on enhancing economic opportunities for women, promoting gender equality in employment, strengthening institutional mechanisms for GBV prevention and improving access to women's healthcare. The Strategic Action Plan (SAP), currently being developed to detail these priorities, will be further in line with existing national-level commitments on gender equality such as the national Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) implemented until 2026, and international obligations on women's rights and gender equality, including the recommendations set out by CEDAW. The five policy goals of the GEAP 'Policy Goal 1: Leadership and Governance', 'Policy Goal 2: Economic Empowerment', 'Policy Goal 3: Institutional Gender Mainstreaming', 'Policy Goal 4: Elimination of Gender Based Violence' and 'Policy Goal 5: Access to Justice', outline the gender equality priorities for Maldives.

In order to achieve these targets, the government has prioritised bringing necessary amendments to existing legal frameworks that protect the rights of women and girls in the Maldives. Amongst the legislations currently under review, amendments to the Family Act, Domestic Violence Prevention Act, Sexual Harassment and Abuse Prevention Act, Sexual Offences Act, Special Provisions Act, Disability Act, Social Protection Act, Gender Equality Act, and the Child Rights Protection Act are expected to enhance gender equality and social inclusion. These amendments will work to strengthen existing mechanisms, address challenges in implementation, and ensure the protection and empowerment of all, especially women and girls. Additionally, new legislations like the Elderly Act, Social Workers Act, and Mental Health Act are being developed to address gaps in the current legislative framework within these sectors.

The efforts towards achieving SDG 5 are also supported by SGII project backed by the Asian Development Bank. This project implemented from 2023 to 2028, aims to increase access to sustainable gender-responsive social services in the Maldives through five outputs (i) improvement of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) statistics; (ii) integration of gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) into government systems; (iii) strengthened capacity of the social service system for aged care, early childcare and domestic violence and gender-based violence (DV/GBV) services; (iv) establishment of partnerships to support DV/GBV prevention, access to DV/GBV services and aged care; and (v) construction of three climate-resilient shelters for DV/GBV survivors in Addu, Hulhumale, and R. Ungoofaaru. These efforts will benefit women survivors of DV/GBV and their dependent children while reducing the unpaid care burden on women responsible for the care of older family members and young children. Amendments to the Domestic Violence Prevention Act will further be in line with the Manifesto commitment to establish a center to root-out gender-based violence, and provide timely, extensive support and assistance to victims.

Strengthening legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms to ensure equality and non-discrimination is essential. As such, the government has introduced the Gender Equality Seal, to recognise state institutions, public and private companies that promote and mainstream gender in the workplace, during the 14-week roadmap of the current administration. The certification, targeted to encourage and incentivise the adoption of gender equality practices within workplaces, will be further expanded to include different tiers.

The Gender Equality Seal will be complemented by the Maldivian Gender Equality Model (MGEM), which is a framework outlined in the GEAP to enhance gender mainstreaming within government institutions. One of the main components of this model is the appointment of designated MGEM Advocates across state institutions, who undertake the task of mainstreaming gender within their respective agencies. Over the next five years, this role will be further institutionalised with tailored responsibilities for MGEM Advocates incorporated into the job responsibilities of each position, and targeted training programs will be carried out for the Advocates to build capacity and knowledge on gender.

The upcoming revision of the Gender Equality Act aims to further strengthen the mechanisms for gender mainstreaming, particularly institutional complaints mechanisms to address issues of gender discrimination within the workplace. This is in line with the Manifesto of the current government which has highlighted the need for stronger legislative measures to guarantee equal pay for equal work. The government's plans to increase the ratio of women in senior management roles and develop policies aimed at facilitating easier access, hiring incentives, and retention guarantees for women in sectors like tourism and hospitality, which are the biggest contributors to the GDP, will further promote gender diversity and equality in the workplace, and reduce the gender pay gap in the next few years.

Economic empowerment of women and increasing access for women's entrepreneurship is one of the key priorities for the next five years and one of the main sectors that require additional efforts to bridge the existing gender disparities. The government has launched a new loan program specifically designed to support women-owned businesses in the Maldives under 'Fashaa Madhadhu' (Initial Help), offering both a loan and leasing option as part of the 14-week roadmap via the SME Development Financing Corporation (SDFC), targeting to disburse 100 million Maldivian Rufiyaa through this program over the next five years, particularly for women who face challenges in accessing finance through conventional banks.

To further support women entrepreneurs, the administration plans to establish a functional nationwide mechanism for women entrepreneurs to market, buy, and sell local agricultural produce and facilitate e-marketing platforms for women entering seafood and fisheries businesses. The next five years will see additional development of avenues that will enhance market access and business opportunities for female entrepreneurs.

Promoting digital and financial inclusion for women is a crucial development angle, for the government in terms of women's economic empowerment. Over the next five years, the government will accelerate its efforts to provide women and girls with necessary skills to succeed in the digital economy, through a national scheme titled 'Women in Technology', focusing on investment promotion, higher education, training programs, strengthening secondary school curriculum on technology.

In addition to these targeted economic opportunities, the government has begun implementing several healthcare policies tailored to the unique needs of women, promoting their overall wellbeing. Comprehensive health coverage for chronic conditions like endometriosis and PCOS, which affect many women in the Maldives, will be provided through the Aasandha health scheme, significantly improving health outcomes for women. IVF treatments have also been included in the Aasandha health scheme and will be accessible in the Maldives.

The administration also plans to introduce specialist preventive health and medical care for mature women, addressing symptoms related to pre-menopause and menopause. Establishing a national maternity and childcare hospital, along with specialist maternity waiting homes in every government hospital, will ensure that women receive the necessary care during pregnancy and childbirth. Additionally, policies such as introducing paid leave for women experiencing miscarriages and subsidised daycare for young children of working mothers will support women in balancing their work and family responsibilities. As the country moves towards an aging population, these measures are also expected to improve fertility rate, and ensure a dignified life for all women.

Efforts to increase women's representation in Parliament are also underway, as outlined in the administration's 14-week roadmap. This aligns with the roll-out plans and lobbying strategy developed by the NWM, via an international consultant supported by UNDP, to achieve the objectives of the 'Leadership and Governance' goal of the GEAP. These efforts include amending the Political Parties Act and introducing temporary special measures to encourage gender-equitable governance and party structures, challenging harmful social norms, and raising public awareness through effective media engagement to promote women in leadership.

Addressing discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes is crucial for achieving gender equality, as these deeply ingrained beliefs and practices significantly hinder women's progress and participation in various sectors of society. Recognising this, the government is committed to intensifying its advocacy efforts to challenge and change these harmful norms. This will involve launching targeted messaging campaigns and incorporating gender sensitisation programs across different levels of society, including state institutions, workplaces, and communities, to raise awareness and promote positive attitudes towards gender equality.

Addressing these priorities requires a multifaceted approach, combining legislative, policy, and programmatic measures, as envisioned in the GEAP and President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu's Manifesto. Legislative measures will involve enacting and enforcing laws that protect women's rights, ensure equal opportunities, and prevent discrimination in all spheres of life. Policy measures will focus on creating a conducive environment for gender equality by integrating gender perspectives into all national policies and plans. Programmatic measures will include specific initiatives and projects aimed at empowering women, such as training programs, support for women entrepreneurs, and efforts to increase women's participation in leadership roles. These comprehensive efforts underscore the government's dedication to fostering an inclusive society where women are empowered and their rights are upheld.

### **Section Three: Progress across the 12 critical areas of concern**

*Inclusive development, shared prosperity and decent work*

#### **6. Over the past five years, what actions has your country taken to advance gender equality in the world of work (including informal and non-standard employment as well as entrepreneurship)?**

One of the greatest and prevailing concerns in the Maldivian context, in terms of gender equality within the economy and women empowerment, has been a low level of engagement of women within the economy. Over the past five years, however, there has been a positive shift, indicating that a greater number of women are now entering the labour force and economically active. The Maldives has observed an increase in women's labour force participation rate (LFPR) from 45.6%, per the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) conducted in 2019, to 48.4%, per the Population and Housing Census conducted in 2022, suggesting enhanced opportunities and gender equality outcomes in the world of work.

Over the past five years, several legislative measures have been introduced which have strengthened labour rights in the Maldives. While these laws do not explicitly have gender-specific provisions embedded in them, the outcome of these measures are anticipated to have a positive impact on gender equality outcomes in the world of work. This includes the establishment of a minimum wage for the first time in the country, in 2021, as well as safeguards established for workers through the introduction of the Occupational Safety and Health Act (Law No. 9/2023), which established standards for workplace safety and employee well-being, as well as the Industrial Relations Act (Law No. 1/2024), which sets out provisions for establishment of trade unions and resolution of disputed between employers and employees. The establishment of a formal law on industrial relations, particularly setting a framework within which trade unions have legal recognition and provisions to work with, can be an avenue under which workers are able to better address grievances.

This includes redress for discrimination on the basis of gender as well as sexual harassment. While there are provisions within the current laws, including the Gender Equality Act (Law No. 18/2016) and the Prevention of Sexual Abuse and Harassment Act (Law No. 16/2014), to address gender-based discrimination and workplace sexual harassment, there are severe legislative gaps and challenges in implementation. The Gender Equality Act (GEA) prohibits direct and indirect discrimination on the basis of gender, including in hiring, retention and promotion of employees, and mandates all employers to establish a complaints mechanism, under which issues of gender-based discrimination in the workplace can be investigated. However, at present there is very little compliance in functionality of such mechanisms; to date the Ministry has only received information on the establishment of the complaints mechanism in 74 state institutions and one private entity. Additionally, although instances of gender discrimination during the recruitment process have been anecdotally identified, there have been no formal reports of such cases made to either the internal mechanisms within workplaces or to the national women's machinery, which is the guardian body for the GEA. A major reason for the inefficiency of such a system is that the nature of having internal complaints and monitoring mechanisms for workplace discrimination is considered redundant, as there is belief that the very people or system in place to investigate the cases are the ones which perpetuate

discrimination. The legislative and regulatory framework also does not clearly outline the procedures for monitoring of violations, and does not grant sufficient legal powers to exercise meaningful change. Restructuring the mechanism via a review of the relevant legislative framework will be a priority, with immediate plans to conduct a legal review of the Gender Equality Act in the coming years.

Similarly, there are ongoing efforts to strengthen mechanisms to prevent and address workplace sexual harassment. While compliance for establishment of committees to investigate and address sexual harassment in the workplace is stronger than the complaints mechanism under the GEA, there are issues with monitoring the existent mechanisms and legislative gaps and challenges in implementation. Stakeholders consulted during this review indicates that a culture of impunity persists within workplaces, particularly in the public sector, even at managerial and high level. There is therefore a lack of trust in internal mechanisms within workplaces to properly investigate and penalise offenders, which results in a lack of reported cases or a number of cases being withdrawn. To address such issues and to create access to alternative pathways of reporting harassment and seeking redress, the government is reviewing the Prevention of Sexual Abuse and Harassment Act (PSAHA), to include alternative avenues to file complaints externally. In 2024, an amendment to the PSAHA was proposed and shared with the Attorney General's Office, which includes a clause on an additional pathway to file complaints externally to a labour-rights authority.

The government has also, within the 14-week roadmap of the current government and in alignment with the manifesto, introduced the Gender Equality Seal, a mechanism to certify workplaces which attain gender equality outcomes and standards, as stipulated by the government. At present, the minimum standards for eligibility of the Seal has been introduced, based on 5 principles: gender-neutral recruitment guideline in appointing personnel; establishing and implementing policies to prevent and address gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment; establishing gender-responsive infrastructure; ensuring equal pay for equal work amongst personnel; and demonstrating commitment to gender equality at decision-making or senior management level. The Seal will be further broadened to include additional certification tiers, which integrate other key indicators to measure workplace gender equality.

In addition to the measures taken to promote a more enabling and gender-equitable workplace environment, there has also been increased effort exerted in the past five years to improve entrepreneurship opportunities for women. This includes an increase in number of trainings and skills development programmes carried out and improved financial inclusion and access to credit for women, including those who are self-employed. Further details on these measures are provided under Question 10 in this report.

**7. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to recognize, reduce and/or redistribute unpaid care and domestic work, promote work-life and family balance and strengthen the rights of paid care workers?**

National-level surveys conducted over the past years, including the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) of 2019, indicate that nearly half of women (49%) outside the labour force are not economically active due to domestic/household responsibilities or care work. The HIES also indicates that women spend triple as much time on unpaid care and domestic work (15% of their day), compared to men (5% of their day), while women spend less time on paid work compared to men. At present, the Maldives does not have the resources to use time-use surveys to more accurately and comprehensively collect data on time-labour and care work. However, the existent data within HIES indicates that women face an increased burden of unpaid care work, which may potentially impede their ability to dedicate time for paid work and limit their financial independence.

In recognition of the need for expanded childcare services or measures to increase affordability of such services, the state has pursued avenues to establish childcare centres or introduce measures such as subsidies for day-care. While the need for a state-run childcare centre has been posited as the most efficient solution by stakeholders, and this has been an avenue pursued by the state, difficulty in acquiring land or space to establish such a centre proved a major challenge. As an alternative means to expedite the availability of childcare spaces and resources for working parents, the government shifted its focus to establishing childcare spaces within government entities and workplaces. Under this policy, some government ministries and SOEs have established childcare spaces within their offices, although this policy has not been adopted across the government or even amongst a majority of state institutions, due to limitations in space. Incorporation of childcare spaces within workplaces is also encouraged within the Gender Equality Seal; introduced as an incentive mechanism for employers to adopt gender-responsive policies and take initiative to eliminate gender gaps in the world of work, the minimum standards for eligibility of the Gender Equality Seal requires the establishment of gender-responsive infrastructure (i.e. at least one facility such as a childcare space, a feeding room, changing stations, within the workplace). Additionally, the current government's manifesto clearly indicates a commitment to introducing affordable childcare options within existing childcare centres to working parents.

The state has also expanded support for vulnerable groups who need care, including older persons and persons with disabilities. Over the past five years, efforts have been made to strengthen the support system for older people and PWDs. At present, the Ministry of Social and Family Development, in partnership with Ministry of Health, carries out a programme for bedridden people over the age of 65. Initiated in 2014, this program aims to ease the burden faced by caretakers and bedridden elderly persons requiring medical services. This is a basic home healthcare service, where medical officers conduct home visits, routine check-ups and provide medical assistance. This program was initiated throughout the country, however due to challenges in capacity and resources, it is presently sustained mostly in the Greater Male' Area (GMA) and some of the islands. Across the GMA, a majority of those who received bedridden services over the past five years have been women; in 2023, nearly 70% (27 out of

39) of those who received assistance under the program were women. The government has also established social centres, designed for senior citizens and older people, with the aim of improving their mental and social well-being. The first centre of this kind was established in February 2024 in Male', with plans to establish others across the country.

Support for PWDs and those caring for PWDs has also been expanded within the past five years. This includes a 50% increase in the monthly allowance provided to PWDs under the disability allowance scheme, and introduction of new allowances such as a self-care allowance who PWDs who require additional resources and consumables, as well as a carer allowance for those caring for PWDs, and an allowance for households with multiple PWDs.<sup>8</sup>

The state has also taken measures to increase parental leave for workers, as a measure of promoting work-life and family balance. In March 2019, maternity leave for public sector workers was extended to six months and paternity leave was extended for one month; this policy applies to all civil servants, including local council employees, and has also been voluntarily adopted by the judiciary (including judges via the amendment to the Judges Act in 2022), state bodies and independent commissions, and a majority of SOEs. Given the fact that the government is the biggest employer in the Maldives, the extension of such a policy is expected to benefit a majority of the working population. However, this policy is not universally applied as the Employment Act (Law No. 2/2008), which the private sector adheres to, only mandates paid maternity leave of 2 months and paid paternity leave of 3 days. The incongruence between policies and practices between the public and private sector has been noted as a concern by stakeholders during the consultation. Additionally, there remain issues for staff even within the public sector to fully exercise their right to paid leave, due to severe understaffing and concerns about service disruption, particularly in service sectors such as health and education. The need for audits on human resources and compliance has been highlighted by stakeholders, as a means to ensure that workers are fully able to exercise their rights, without disruption to service provision. It is also difficult to ascertain the success of the extended leave policy in retaining working mothers, due to lack of comprehensive data analysis, although research indicates that state policies such as extension of maternity leaves must also be complemented with greater advocacy for men or fathers to take on more childcare responsibilities and care work, for meaningful change and redistribution of care work<sup>9</sup>.

While there have not been specific campaigns focused on promotion of more equal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work, these messages have been incorporated into nation-wide campaigns carried out over the past five years. This includes the Geveshi Gulhun campaign, a campaign that broadly aims to strengthen domestic and familial relationships, which included a men engagement component, where positive messages on sharing familiar responsibilities were promoted. Additional details on this campaign are provided throughout this report.

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<sup>8</sup> President's Office. (2023, June 15). *The administration reveals a new disability financial support framework* [Press release]. <https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/28519>

<sup>9</sup> Hussain, E., & Riyaz, A. (2023). An Exploratory Study on the Maternity Leave Policy and Normative Discrimination in the Greater Male'Region. *Journal of Advanced Research in Women's Studies*, 1(1), 1-19.

## **8. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to reduce the gender digital divide?**

Maldives does not have a significant gender digital divide, comparative to other countries globally and within the region. The Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) 2016-2017 indicates that the proportion of individuals who own a mobile phone are near-parity, at 96.7% for males and 95.5% for females. Additionally, the DHS also indicates that the proportion of individuals using the Internet is 86.8% for men and 78.3%. There has, however, not been any recent gender analysis on usage of mobile phones, the Internet or digital platforms, which will allow for deeper understanding on the extent to which existent gaps have been closed over the past five years.

However, in recent years, the Maldives has taken significant steps to bridge the gender digital divide and promote women's participation in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector. The Maldives' multi-faceted approach includes high-level advocacy, corporate initiatives, specialised training programs, celebratory platforms, and community-focused projects. These efforts aim to increase women's participation in the ICT sector, provide necessary skills, and celebrate their achievements, thereby working towards reducing the gender digital divide.

One key measure taken over the recent past is to increase connectivity across the country. The Community e-Centre Project, funded by the SAARC Development Fund, which was initiated in 2016 and carried out until 2022 aims to empower residents of the least connected island communities with access to computing and Internet technology. This project includes workshops and awareness programs which focused on enhancement of digital literacy, as well as access to public services, government resources, educational platforms, and digital health resources. With a broad aim of diversifying, strengthening, and increasing productivity in small communities, and facilitating socio-economic development through ICT, these programmes include a special focus on increasing the participation and engagement of women to maximise impact and fostering a more inclusive digital environment.

Additionally, throughout the digitalisation of the schooling and education system, there have been significant efforts to bridge gaps brought about by geographic and gender differences. Students who undertake inline learning are provided devices such as Chromebooks free of charge by the government, and Internet is provided free to school students. At present, an approximately 70,000 devices have been issued for this purpose. The Ministry of Education (MoE) further ensures that digital tools used by students and educators have stringent monitoring to ensure safety in online and digital spaces.

There have also been significant measures taken to increase the affordability of Internet access, following the onset of COVID-19 and the increasing dependency on digitalisation, with an initiative launched in 2021 to work with Internet Service Providers to provide significant cuts in internet package fees; there was a 25-33% reduction in costs for Internet packages, after this policy was introduced.<sup>10</sup> Although these measures were not specifically aimed at women, the

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<sup>10</sup> PSM News. (2021, September 30). *Dhiraagu and Ooredoo to lower mobile Internet prices starting from October 1* <https://psmnews.mv/en/92728>



increased connectivity benefited the nation as a whole and created more avenues for those working from home during COVID-19, such as those who were operating online businesses.

Establishment of infrastructure and policies to increase access to technology and Internet has also been supplemented with skill development and training programs, with some programs carried out over the past five years being focused on women. This includes trainings on areas such as e-commerce, digital literacy and coding. These programmes are often carried out in partnership with both international bodies as well as local non-governmental organisations. In 2023, for example, a programme was carried out by the National Centre for Information Technology (NCIT), in partnership with MoGFSS (now MoSFD) and APCICT, to mark International Women's Day. In conjunction with the theme for IWD that year, the training focused on provision of e-commerce and digital marketing skills for women entrepreneurs. A total of 32 women, including those currently running businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs, participated in this training. Further iterations of similar trainings are planned to be carried out with the support of APCICT, including programmes in different regions of the Maldives.

Another programme aimed at providing technical skills to women and girls is the 'Girls to Code' initiative, held in partnership with Women in Tech Maldives, a NGO focusing on women in science and technology in the Maldives. This programme teaches girls, aged 14 to 20, basic coding skills using HTML, CSS, and JavaScript, and aims to inspire and empower young women to join the technology fields. Initiated in 2019, this programme has had continued iterations over the past five years, including in various regions across the country. The positive outcomes through this programme indicates that early engagement and targeted training programs can significantly inspire young women to pursue careers in technology.

There have also been concerted efforts to increase women's participation in the technology sector, including high-level advocacy within the Ministry, platforms to promote women's role in the sector, and corporate initiatives taken by telecommunications providers. Measures undertaken within this area are detailed in the response to Question 23.

**9. In the past five years, how has the macroeconomic and fiscal policy environment affected the implementation of the BPfA in your country, and what macroeconomic policies has your country implemented in support of a more gender-equal economy?**

Over the past five years, there have been several fiscal policies and austerity measures introduced in the Maldives, including increase in taxations. Effective from 1 January 2023, Goods and Services Tax (GST) rate increased from 6% to 8%, and Tourism Goods and Services Tax (TGST) rate increasing from 12% to 16%. Additionally, from 1 January 2023 onwards, the scope of the green tax was expanded from tourist resorts and islands to include resort hotels and integrated hotels. From 1 January 2022 onwards, airport service charge was repealed and replaced with departure tax at a higher rate. At present, there is no mechanism in place nor capacity within the government apparatus to assess the impact of such measures on women and men. However, it is possible that household dynamics, including who is primarily responsible for household expenses such as groceries, are significantly gendered and that the changes to GST therefore may have had a gendered impact.

There have also been directives from the Ministry of Finance (MoF) issued over the past five years, to reduce public expenditure. The Ministry advises against hiring new employees, changing salary structures, introducing new allowances, and undertaking overtime work unless absolutely necessary. Furthermore, any expenditure above MVR 35,000 on trips, training programs, or office maintenance also requires direct approval from MoF. Additionally, the ministry has instructed to cease awarding new scholarships, and official overseas trips now require authorisation from the ministry. While no gender impact assessments of such measures have been conducted, there are some concerns about delays in provision of services due to lack of funds for maintenance and infrastructure development. For example, the DJA reports that there are currently major issues due to lack of infrastructure for courts, which creates significant delays in court proceedings, and can hinder access to justice, especially in sensitive cases such as GBV related offences.

One substantial policy being introduced to reduce public expenditure is bulk procurement of drugs through UNDP's global health procurement network, via an agreement with UNDP in June 2023. This project is expected to reduce the expenditure on the national health insurance scheme (Aasandha), of which 60% is spent on procuring drugs, creating a considerable burden on and the overall budget. Alleviation of this burden is expected to reduce public expenditure overall and more efficient allocation of resources for other areas.

In terms of how resource mobilisation has been gender-sensitive, the Maldives adopted a gender-responsive Integrated National Finance Framework (INFF) strategy in 2023. The INFF is a comprehensive financing strategy on climate action, aimed to mobilise both domestic and external resources to supplement existing public funds towards climate and social sector needs. The INFF supports the financing of national and sectoral development plans to enable achievement of sustainable development commitments, and incorporates gender equality as a crosscutting theme.

## **10. In the last five years, what actions has your country taken to reduce/eradicate poverty among women and girls?**

The Maldives has the highest GDP per capita and human development outcomes in South Asia, and congruently there is a fairly low level of poverty, relative to other countries in the region, both in terms of income poverty and multidimensional poverty.

The income poverty rate as measured by the international poverty line (5.5 USD per person per day) is 1.7% while at the national poverty line (71.4 Maldivian rufiyaa per person per day), the poverty rate is 5.4 percent.<sup>11</sup> A majority of the population living below the poverty line are concentrated in the atolls outside Male', with 93% of the poor living in atolls. Nearly 10% of those in the atolls are poor, compared to less than 1% in Male, indicating that there is significantly more vulnerability for those residing in the atolls.

Similar trends are observed in multidimensional poverty, which indicates that while Male' accounts for 39% of the national population, the percentage of MPI poor population in Male' is 13%.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, while the atolls make up 61% of the national population, the percentage of MPI poor population in the atolls is 87%, indicating that a significant majority of the population outside Male' is multidimensional poor. MPI is measured across three dimensions: health, education, and standard of living. The discrepancy of MPI for Male' and the atolls particularly the high rates of MPI in regions that lie further away from Male' may be attributed to difficulties in accessing quality services such as healthcare and education, as well as lack of infrastructure such as sanitation, sewerage and housing in the atolls.

This has gendered implications given that, as highlighted elsewhere in this report, women make up the majority of the population in the atolls; this is further compounded by the fact that a significant portion of households, particularly in the atolls, are headed by women. Per the 2022 census, the proportion of Maldivian households that are female-headed in Male' is 42%, compared to 52% in the atolls.

While no specific focused interventions on poverty reduction amongst women and girls have been introduced, the Maldives does presently have social protection mechanisms such as cash transfers and allowances for those living in poverty, and other vulnerable situations, including single parents and people with disabilities. The Food Assistance Program is a targeted conditional cash transfer program, providing financial support to vulnerable people to purchase staple foods (sugar, flour, rice). Beneficiaries are paid a monthly allowance of MVR 40 per person and a maximum of MVR 240 per household. While a total of 147 households have received assistance under this program in 2022 and 2023, gender-disaggregated data on beneficiaries indicate that a majority, at 57% of beneficiaries, are women.

In addition to social protection measures, other policies introduced over the past five years are also expected to have a positive outcome on women in terms of income. As mentioned in previous sections of this report, a minimum wage was introduced for the first time in the Maldives in 2021. The introduction of the minimum wage impacted a significant number of civil servants, the majority of whom are comprised of women. While the civil service is

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<sup>11</sup> Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2022). Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2020). National Multidimensional Poverty in Maldives 2020.

composed of 65% women, nearly 20% of women in the civil service work in support services or the lowest-ranking jobs, meaning that the introduction of the minimum wage impacted their average earnings.

There have also been concerted efforts to support women's entrepreneurship by providing skill development trainings and broadening access to markets as well as financial credit schemes, which aims to increase income-earning opportunities for women and therefore pre-emptively acts as a poverty reduction tactic.

The SME Development Finance Corporation (SDFC), which was established in 2019 as a dedicated lending institution for SMEs, has special provisions for women and other marginalised groups such as youth and people with disabilities. This includes additional support for women, youth and PWDs who apply for credit facilities, which helps these groups attain higher scores within SDFC's internal credit rating system. Since 2019 until April 2024, SDFC has received a total of 4,616 loan applications across 11 loan products; while 1,693 loans have been approved thus far, 24% of these loans have been issued to women or women-inclusive applicants. SDFC also has a loan product exclusively for women (Fashaa Madhadhu), launched in March 2024 as part of the first 100-day pledges of the current administration: this loan scheme aims to provide a total of MVR 100 million to women entrepreneurs; a special provision has been made to reserve 25% of loans disbursed under this scheme to women with disabilities. Notably, this loan does not require a collateral, as the maximum loan facility amount is MVR 500,000 and SDFC's policy requires collateral for loans above MVR 1 million.

There have also been enhanced efforts to provide skill development trainings and increased avenues for marketing for women entrepreneurs, particularly through the work carried out by the Business Centre Corporation, a SOE created in 2019. The BCC has carried out trainings focused on areas such as entrepreneurship development and development of technical and soft skills, as well as vocational training programs with a total of 8,344 participants trained; 60% of those who were trained were women. Additionally, BCC provides advisory sessions or consultation services for entrepreneurs who need support; across a total of 13 regional Business Centres in the country, as well as Male'; 26% of these sessions were with women. Additionally, it is predominantly women who engage as vendors within initiatives carried out by BCC. This includes the establishment of Authentic Maldives, a chain of boutique stores which market local Maldivian products, which includes a total of 318 vendors, out of which 184 are women. In 2022, BCC also established the SME Hub, a commercial space for MSMEs, where out of a total 17 vendors, 10 are women. Additionally, under the government's 14-week roadmap to achieve its 100-day pledges, BCC established the "Hiyala" market, which provides women entrepreneurs with a dedicated marketplace to showcase and sell products during the weekends. A total of 98 women entrepreneurs have participated in this initiative, and as a result have had greater access to markets.

## **11. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to improve access to social protection for women and girls?**

Maldives has several social protection schemes currently in place and there are no barriers to access these schemes, in terms of gender. However, statistics from the National Social Protection Agency (NSPA) indicate that a large portion of beneficiaries across various social protection schemes are women.

There are currently no existing cash transfer programs or benefits specifically provided for women. However, NSPA provides an allowance for single parents, of which 98% of the recipients are single mothers. The Single Parent Allowance program is a targeted conditional cash transfer program implemented under the Social Protection Act (2/2014), providing financial support to vulnerable single parents caring for their children. Eligible single parents registered under this program receive a monthly allowance of MVR 1,000 per child. Over the past five years, there have been measures taken to strengthen the single parent allowance, with the ceiling per parent being raised from MVR 3,000 to MVR 10,000 in November 2019. However, the amount per child has not been reviewed and remains at MVR 1,000; in consideration of the evolving economic situation and rising costs of living, there have been public concerns raised about the limitations of this allowance in providing for the necessary expenses. Recognising these concerns, the current government's manifesto includes a commitment to increase the ceiling for the allowance and President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu has pledged to review and increase the single parent allowance in the coming year, noting that the present fiscal situation and economic challenges hinder the feasibility of an immediate change to the allowance.

The Maldives has a fairly robust universal pension scheme for older persons, including older women. The Pension Act of the Maldives established a multi-pillar pension system, consisting of the contributory Maldives Retirement Pension Scheme (MRPS), which is mandatory for all formal sector employers and employees to contribute to, and the non-contributory old-age Basic Pension Scheme. All eligible Maldivian citizens aged 65 years and above are entitled to receive the basic pension. This scheme acts as a social protection floor designed to alleviate poverty in old age and reduce dependence on family members and vulnerability to exploitation and neglect. Beneficiaries of the basic pension are nearly divided in half amongst men and women, suggesting equitable benefits across genders<sup>13</sup>. However, women account for only 20% of the beneficiaries under the MRPS,<sup>14</sup> perhaps owing to the fact that far less women are economically active compared to men, and that many of those who are engaged in employed are within the informal sector and not mandated to contribute to the MRPS.

Additionally, the Maldives has specific social protection schemes available to vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities. The Disability allowance was introduced under the Disability Act (Law No. 8/2010), with the main aim of protecting and providing disabled citizens the same rights and opportunities as any other citizen. At present, PWDS can receive financial assistance for therapeutic services and psychological assessments, assistive devices (i.e. wheelchairs, walkers, hearing aids, etc.), and an identification card indicating their

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<sup>13</sup> Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2023). Statistical Yearbook of Maldives 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

disability status. In June 2023, the basic monthly allowance under the program was increased from MVR 2,000 to MVR 3,000<sup>15</sup>. In addition to the increment for the basic monthly allowance, three additional benefits were introduced to expand support for PWDS: the Carer Allowance, designed for those who care for individuals unable to live independently due to disabilities or requiring assistance from others, at MVR 2,000 per month; the Self Care Allowance of MVR 1,000 for individuals with disabilities who require additional resources to meet basic needs and acquire necessary consumables; and an additional MVR 1,000 for households with more than three individuals with disabilities. Data from NSPA indicates that women with disabilities account for 42% of those receiving the Disability Allowance. Additionally, a National Disability Register (NDR) was established in 2023. The DNR is a means to ensure that specific needs of PWDs are met, and will allow for greater efforts to enhance access to social protection for PWDs.

While Maldives does not currently have an unemployment insurance or benefit scheme, the introduction of such a scheme is planned under the Sustainable and Integrated Labour Services (SAILS) project in partnership with the World Bank. Unemployment Insurance benefit scheme and employment services will be provided through Job Centres across the country. It is expected that this scheme will be rolled out in the coming years.

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<sup>15</sup> President's Office. (2023, June 15). *The administration reveals a new disability financial support framework* [Press release]. <https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/28519>

## **12. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to improve health outcomes for women and girls in your country?**

Maldives has made significant gains in increasing access to health and improving health outcomes for women and girls, attaining near-parity scores in the Global Gender Gap index with gradual improvements from 0.953 in 2020 to 0.962 in 2023.

Despite the general strides made, there are inherent challenges in ensuring equitable access to due to the Maldives' geographic dispersion. Maldives operates on a tiered model of healthcare facilities, with every island having a health centre where basic health services are accessible, and atoll hospitals with a broader range of services established within every atoll. There are additionally regional hospitals based in five regions, with some regions having tertiary level facilities. The challenges created by the geographical distance to better-equipped health facilities can manifest gendered differences in accessibility; for example, there may arise complications for pregnant women who have to travel to seek specialty care.

However, there has been efforts to improve transport infrastructure across the country, which have made accessibility gaps significantly narrower. Sea ambulance services, with at least one sea ambulance operating in every atoll, have been established nation-wide. Additionally, the introduction and expansion of RTL has made travel between islands much more affordable to the general population; this can alleviate the burden incurred by patients who may require frequent travel for care due to chronic conditions. The government also conducts out-reach programs including visitations by doctors in specialty fields, as well as ante-natal care and screenings prior to delivery which identify any need for escalation or referral to special medical care, which enables the population in remote or underservices areas to seek medical services without incurring significant personal costs. The government has also initiated establishment of air ambulance services in 2024, and plans to expand laboratory services to all inhabited islands, as outlined in its manifesto.

Furthermore, Maldives is in the process of piloting a primary healthcare (PHC) model, which has been launched in Faafu Atoll is and further expected to be rolled out in 10 other atolls in the coming months. Under PHC, there will be additional mechanisms in place to prevent and identify chronic and non-communicable diseases at island level, including cancer. Early detection is expected to reduce the burden on the healthcare system, and reduce the need to services at secondary and tertiary level; this can in turn alleviate the burden on islanders living in more remote areas.

In addition to the infrastructure in place to provide and expand health coverage for the population, the Maldives has a universal health insurance scheme (Aasandha) which guarantees free healthcare for all Maldivians. Notable policies have been adopted in the recent past such as the inclusion of services related to conditions which affect women such as polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) and endometriosis under Aasandha. There is thus a fairly comprehensive level of health coverage in the Maldives.

Maldives has made strides in expansion of health services for women and girls, including SRH services, maternal health and HIV services. Over 99% of births in the Maldives are attended to

by a health professional.<sup>16</sup> Over the past five years, a substantial amount of policies and guidelines focusing on maternal health, as well as SRH have been introduced, strengthening the current regulatory framework on such issues. A comprehensive strategy and action plan on reproductive, maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health (RMNCAH) was developed and rolled out in 2020, with implementation scheduled until 2025. However, there are concerns about challenges in implementation of this strategy and inconsistency in practice, especially with regard to provision of services for unmarried women. While the health system has robust guidelines on reproductive and maternal health, there is anecdotal evidence indicating that service providers use their own discretion or personal values when deciding whether to provide some services such as contraceptives. There have been observations made by a range of stakeholders that societal perceptions about SRH as a taboo topic significantly hinders equitable access to services. A greater need for advocacy and awareness, as well as carrying out trainings for healthcare professionals including values clarification exercises is therefore identified.

However, the Ministry of Health and HPA notes that great success has been demonstrated in previous campaigns carried out, such as a campaign on preventing HPV. This campaign included provision of vaccination targeted at girls aged between 10 and 15, supplemented with raising awareness amongst parents on the risk factors for adolescent girls and the importance of vaccinating against HPV, to pre-emptively address the risk of cervical cancer. While there was an observed reluctance amongst most parents initially, the advocacy efforts conducted by the Ministry resulted in exhaustion of the vaccines available, and pro-active requests from parents to seek vaccines for girls. There is thus good precedence of advocacy programmes conducted on SRH topics, which indicate that they can generate positive shifts in perception and behaviour.

One key advancement in healthcare provision over the past five years is the broadening of mental health services across the country. A national Centre for Mental Health was established in IGMH in 2020 and mental health services are currently available in Hulhumale' Hospital and five regional hospitals. While specific provisions are not presently made targeted at women, statistics indicate that 42.6% of women indicated experiencing some level of depression, as opposed to 29.4% of men<sup>17</sup>, indicating the need for a gender-responsive approach to mental health. The Health Protection Agency (HPA) is also currently working on developing a new guideline for post-natal care, which will include specific focus on identifying post-partum depression. At present, checks are conducted during the voluntary 3-day post-partum review and efforts are made to provide information to expecting mothers via pre-natal sessions. However, as these sessions are also voluntary, it is difficult to cover the entirety of the population which needs the information. It is expected that as primary health care gets expanded in the Maldives, there will be more robust mechanisms in place for early detection and intervention in cases of post-partum depression.

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<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Health (2021). Maldives Health Statistics 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Abdul Raheem, R. & Moosa, S. (2022). WHO STEP Survey on Risk Factors for Noncommunicable Diseases: Maldives 2020-2021. Male': The Maldives National University.



Additionally, the Ministry of Health has recently reviewed the Health Sector Response to GBV. Initially adopted in 2014, this guideline has been reviewed and endorsed in 2023, and trainings orienting healthcare professionals on the new guideline are being rolled out. Trainings such as these are expected to better harmonise service provision, and sensitise healthcare professionals on gendered issues.

**12. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to improve education outcomes and skills for women and girls, including in sectors where they are underrepresented?**

The Maldives has observed generally equitable outcomes for both genders in education, with near-parity scores in the past five years, observed in the Global Gender Gap index. Maldives observes a high rate of enrolment of girls and women within the education system. Girls have a higher net enrolment rate for both primary level, at 98.3% compared to 95.4% compared to boys, and higher secondary education, at 24.4% compared to 17.5% for boys<sup>18</sup>. Female students not only outnumber their male counterparts but also tend to perform better academically, as reflected in number of students who receive merit-based scholarships and rank amongst the top performers awarded by the government.

Similar patterns are observed in tertiary education, where women have higher rates amongst enrolment, graduate output and drop-outs. Based on statistics from 2019 to 2022, published by the Ministry of Higher Education, 62% of those enrolled in local higher education institutions were women.<sup>19</sup> From 2019 to 2022, a gradual increase was observed from 59% to 64%. Similar patterns are observed in graduate output with an average of 60% of new local graduates being women. However, at the same time, women also account for a majority of dropouts at 62% in 2022. This is also particularly concerning given that figures from 2019 indicate that women only accounted for 12% of drop-outs. There are also concerns due to the relatively high levels of attainment of higher education amongst women, yet the persistently low levels of LFPR indicate that attainment of education does not translate into employability. While no analysis or study has been conducted to identify the reasons for these incongruences, coupled with the high rates of dropouts and figures from HIES which highlight the burden domestic and care work creates on women, it is possible that this burden presents a significant barrier to generating meaningful educational outcomes for women.

Despite the aforementioned issues, which need prioritisation in the coming years, over the past five years, there have been additional achievements which have broadened access to education and equitable opportunities for girls and women.

The passage of the Education Act in 2020, which came into force in 2021, marked a significant milestone in the Maldives' education sector. The law provides a framework to ensure equal rights and opportunities for children and adults to pursue education, mandating the government to provide free primary, secondary and higher secondary education to all Maldivians. The law further establishes the rights of the students as well as teachers with regard to education, the responsibilities of the state, parents and tutors. Under this Act, regulations and policies have been introduced which specify minimum standards for educational facilities, including mandating specific infrastructure for women and girls (e.g. separate toilet facilities, menstrual hygiene facilities in schools).

The introduction and enactment of the Education Act coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which had severely disrupted schooling and made apparent the need for shifts in service

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<sup>18</sup> Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2023). Statistical Yearbook of the Maldives 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of Higher Education (2023). Statistics Booklet 2019-2023.

provision within the education sector. Historically, education in the Maldives relied exclusively on physical attendance at schools. However, the pandemic necessitated the introduction of online teaching as an alternative mode of education. This approach enables children in remote areas to attend classes online, with teachers delivering lessons from the capital city through a satellite hub. The first satellite school was established in 2021, enabling students even within less-populated remote islands to be able to complete schooling uninterrupted with other cohorts of students. Prior to the establishment of digital learning, students from islands where the low population often had to commute daily or move to other islands where schools were established which taught their grades. Social norms and perceptions about safety of women have often meant there is greater reluctance amongst parents to send girls to other islands for schooling, or for girls to travel frequently. With the necessity of travel no longer being a concern, and the option to study within their own islands and homes, there is implicitly greater access to education for girls. Additionally, with the state being mandated to provide education until students reach the age of 18 or complete grade 10 under the Education Act, and the introduction of satellite schools and flexible learning platforms following the onset of COVID-19, pathways have been created to ensure continuity of education, even for children who undergo teen pregnancy, or come into conflict with the law such as in cases of incarceration. The shift to adopt online learning and establishment of satellite schools not only addressed the immediate needs of the crisis but also paved the way for more flexible and inclusive educational opportunities.

Policy changes have also ensured that educational opportunities are provided irrespective of student numbers, with provisions allowing for classes to be held even for a single student pursuing higher secondary education. As the school system in Maldives currently includes separate streams for study for students in secondary school, this will broaden access to students who wish to study streams such as science and expand opportunities for those interested in pursuing STEM education. MoE is also presently working on integrating STEM education across the Maldives and is set to pilot the program in the upcoming academic year. This program will cover various skills, such as coding, tailored to meet the specific needs of different islands, based on a pre-assessment. Additionally, alternative pathways to education, including TVET and BTEC programs have been introduced to ensure that students develop necessary skills to enter the labour market, and these pathways have been integrated into school systems, including recognition of high-performing students amongst the national Top 10 awards.

Efforts have also been made to address gender bias within educational curricula, which was last developed in 2015. The Ministry of Education is currently reviewing all textbooks and learning materials, with curriculum revisions having begun in 2020. Conducted in phases, revisions have been made for the curricula and learning materials for grades 1 to 3, with the review of the grade 4 curricula scheduled for the coming year. There is concerted effort through this review process to eliminate any gender discrimination or bias within the content and to ensure gender sensitivity.

Reviews to the curricula and learning materials are supplemented by trainings provided to teachers and education professions, via the professional development courses. Life skills programmes are offered to both teachers and students; for students, life skill programs,

including sexual education, are primarily targeted at students in grade 7 and above. However, there are challenges due to insufficient capacity to carry out these programmes as the sector faces ongoing difficulties in attracting and retaining local teachers, partially due to the sensitive nature of the content, which impacts the overall effectiveness of these initiatives.

Overall, Maldives continues to have equitable access to education, with the new Education Act and digitalisation breaking down existing barriers. However, there remain issues to be addresses in terms of ensuring educational outcomes are translated into employability for women.

**14. What actions has your country taken to ensure that economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic closes gender gaps in poverty, employment, social protection, education, and/or health that the pandemic has exacerbated?**

While the initial response to COVID-19 proved extremely difficult due to the geographic dispersion of the country, the lack of adequate facilities or capacities in many regions, and the general lack of crisis response mechanisms in place, the shifts brought about by the pandemic have fundamentally changed service provision in the Maldives.

For example, as highlighted above, the education system underwent severe shifts with the introduction of satellite schools and online learning. Although online learning was initially adopted as an emergency response, increasing digitalisation in education provision has helped to close existing gender gaps and increasing access for education across the country. The shift towards digitalisation also led to the introduction of telemedicine, which bridged some accessibility gaps in healthcare.

COVID-19 most significantly impacted the economy, both across the globe and in the Maldives. As a result, the government initiated several projects with the intention of developing a more resilient economy and to support those whose livelihoods has been disrupted. This includes the COVID-19 Emergency Income Support Project, which provided a security net for many whose employment was disrupted; as highlighted elsewhere in this report, there were gender-responsive changes made to the application criteria under this project, to ensure that women whose livelihoods were disrupted but were informally employed could also access income support. While the income support project was an emergency response and has been concluded, there are additional projects that are currently underway to strengthen the social protection system and protect workers from future shocks.

This includes the World Bank-supported SAILS project, under which an unemployment insurance scheme is proposed to be introduced. Additionally, the World Bank also provided the government support in developing the ‘Maldives Enhancing Employability and Resilience of Youth (MEERY) project. The MEERY project’s objective is to empower youth with skills and entrepreneurship trainings to address the job market amid the COVID-19 pandemic; it broadly aims to address the issue of the youth NEET population and the gender gap in the labour force. Under the MEERY project, a program on ‘Grants for Women Led Businesses’ and ‘Grants for Tailoring Businesses’ was carried out in Male’ and three other urban centres. The program included trainings for applicants on business ideation and business plan formulation. Under this program, over USD 1 million was approved for 245 applicants; the disbursed amount was USD 863,207 for 235 applicants.

Good policies and practices initiated during COVID have been sustained and built open, over the past five years, which have further enhanced opportunities for women in the Maldives.

**15. Over the past five years, which forms of gender-based violence, and in which specific contexts or settings, has your country prioritized for action?**

The past five years has seen an increase in reported cases of gender-based violence, across varying forms including domestic violence, intimate partner violence, technology-facilitated violence and femicide. Incidents of gender-based violence cases reported to the Ministry of Social and Family Development increased from 433 cases in 2019 to 485 cases in 2023. Over the reporting period, cases reported were predominantly cases of violence against women and girls. 56% of cases concerning children were cases of violence against girls, and in cases of GBV concerning adults, 88% were cases of violence against women. For cases of GBV against adults, further analysis indicates that when disaggregated by types of violence, a majority of cases were VAW in every type of violence recorded. Statistics published by FPA from 2019 to 2023 indicate that the number of DV cases reported have increased from 548 cases in 2019 to 614 cases in 2023, and that a majority of these cases involved violence against women.

Crime statistics published by MPS indicate that the number of sexual offence cases reported have seen a decrease over the past five years, from 407 cases in 2019, a peak of 490 cases in 2020, to a gradual decline of 291 cases in 2023. The decline in reported cases may not indicate a decline in actual incidence of sexual offences. As highlighted by stakeholders consulted during this review, including law enforcement agencies, there is significant reluctance amongst victims to report cases of sexual offence due to stigma and fear. They also note that it is often difficult to collect evidence and build up a strong case, which discourage victims from reporting such crimes. Statistics provided by MPS indicate a very low level of cases which are sent to prosecution, at only 3% of cases. It is imperative that the mechanisms in place to ensure justice for victims of sexual offence are strengthened, and greater efforts exerted to address stigma faced by victims.

A majority of gender-based violence cases reported fall within the purview of domestic violence, perhaps owing to the fact that domestic violence has a broad definition within the Maldivian legislative framework and context. The Domestic Violence Prevention Act (Law No. 13/2012) recognises domestic relationships as existing between persons who are or were married to each other; people who live together in the same together or were living together recently; parents or persons entrusted with care of a child as a guardian or custodian; family members related by consanguinity, affinity, or marriage; domestic child care workers or domestic workers at home; and persons in an intimate relationship. In analysis of domestic violence cases reported to the state, a significant portion of such cases also fall within the purview of intimate partner violence.

In terms of cases of domestic violence, the number of physical abuse cases increases every year, remaining the type of abuse that most frequently gets reported. However, there has also been a trend observed in increase in verbal and psychological abuse cases from 2019 onwards. There is also an increase in cases of intimidation and blackmail (using photos and videos) as a type of abuse, particularly perpetrated by intimate partners, observed over the past few years. While the reasons for this trend has not been studied or analysed, it is possible that the increase in technology-facilitated GBV is an adverse consequence of increasing digitalisation following

the onset of COVID-19. FPA also reports that there has been an increase in cases of strangulation every year. This is concerning, given that non-fatal strangulation has been an identified as a strong predictor for femicide.

Femicide cases have also increased over the past five years. While a total of 110 homicide cases have been investigated by the Maldives Police Service from 2001 onwards, with a total of 7 femicide cases investigated over this period, 4 of these femicide cases occurred during the reporting period or the past five years. This indicates an intensification of violence against women over the past few years. Many of these cases involve an intimate partner as the perpetrator. Addressing domestic violence and IPV, and intervening early, is therefore perceived to be a priority to prevent greater depravity of violence and address femicide.

Prioritising DV is also essential due to observed legislative gaps which in some cases hinders the authorities from ensuring the safety of the victim. Given the nature of the crime, there are significant issues in obtaining evidence and conducting a thorough investigation, especially in situations where victims do not cooperate fully or do not wish to pursue the case. In many of these cases, the victim often lives with the perpetrator and there are limited avenues for the authorities to intervene and ensure their safety, due to limitations within the law. For such cases, where the victim remains in a relationship with the perpetrator or in continuous interactions with them, the investigation may not be completed due to risk of exposing the victim to additional danger, during the investigation process.

While no analysis has yet been conducted on the factors that contribute to the increase in GBV cases, there have been an increase in issues related to perpetrators who are substance users as well as those with mental health issues. With these areas being identified as priority areas, FPA has developed policy papers on the current gaps including: policy papers on gaps identified in the system including Perpetrator Rehabilitation, Emergency Fund for Survivors, and Mental Health Services in the Social Sector. It is imperative that support is provided to substance users as well those with mental health issues, and carry out harm-reduction interventions, and work to rehabilitate perpetrators – particularly those with mental health or substance use issues – to reduce recidivism.

## **16. In the past five years, what actions has your country prioritized to address gender-based violence?**

Over the past five years, a number of key measures including amendments to the legislative framework, programs to strengthen capacity and support services, and additional strategies to prevent violence against women have been implemented.

One such critical measure is the landmark amendment made to the Sexual Offences Act (Law No. 17/2014) that extended the definition of rape, sexual injury and sexual assault to married couple and unconditionally recognised marital rape as a criminal offence. Prior to this amendment, marital rape was only considered an offence if the married parties were in the legal process of dissolving the marriage, had a pending divorce application at the court, were otherwise living separately under an agreement, or if the husband has sex with the wife with the intent to transmit a dangerous sexually transmitted disease. The amendment to the Sexual Offences Act also further mandates training health facility staff on trauma-informed and victim centred approach to GBV services, and the provision of rape kits in government hospitals and health facilities. It additionally mandates the police to use rape kits in investigations. This amendment seeks to strengthen the investigative procedure and encourage comprehensive evidence collection at the initial stage, to enable the formulation of a stronger prosecution case.

As highlighted elsewhere in this report, the most prevalent type of GBV in the Maldives is domestic violence, which manifests in various forms. There have been concerted efforts to address domestic violence, including strengthening the current legislative and regulatory framework. Although there is a consensus amongst stakeholders that the current Domestic Violence Prevention Act (Law No. 13/2012) is outdated and in some circumstances limits authorities' power to intervene and ensure protection of victims, the act is yet to undergo any amendments. However, a review of the DVPA was carried out by FPA, with recommendations being highlighted and shared with the Attorney General's Office. A comprehensive review and amendment to the law is presently pending, as the DVPA is planned to be amended in conjunction with a review of the Family Act (Law No. 4/2000). The Family Act has undergone a review by an international consultant but recommendations made within this review needs to be localised to bring about legislative amendments and review other relevant laws.

While there remain significant legislative gaps that have yet to be addressed due to delays in amending the relevant laws, the Maldives has developed and implemented national action plans aimed at preventing and responding to GBV. The Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) includes specific goals and activities to address GBV, such as awareness campaigns, capacity-building initiatives, and the integration of GBV prevention into broader gender equality strategies. Policy Goal 4 of the GEAP is singularly focused on addressing GBV by implementing targeted initiatives aimed at enhancing the capacity of relevant stakeholders and interagency coordination mechanisms to address GBV, reviewing and strengthening existing laws related to GBV, strengthening support services such as operationalising shelters and helplines, advocacy including comprehensive SRHR education and training. Policy Goal 5 (Access to Justice) of the GEAP also includes actions such as sensitising law enforcement officers, judges and the media, and expand support for victims of GBV such as psychosocial and legal support, with the broad aim of increasing access to justice.



There have also been efforts to accelerate the implementation of the DVPA through the Domestic Violence Prevention National Strategy (DVPNS) and the joint action plan to implement the DVPNS. The second DVPNS was planned to be implemented from 2017 to 2022, but with challenges in implementation during COVID-19, the implementation period was extended until 2023. Subsequently, the third iteration of the DVPNS was rolled out in 2023, with implementation planned until 2027. This has been supplemented with the introduction of a joint action plan, to conduct prevention and system strengthening work in a strategic and collaborative manner. The DVPNS includes 5 main priority areas: Prevention, Protection, Collaboration, Accountability, and Governance. The multi-sectoral action plan includes 13 intervention areas that engage all age groups, with a significant focus on marginalised communities.

With the increase in reported number of cases, the need to expand support services has been growing more apparent. To address this, there have been concerted efforts, as reflected in the existing action plans, to develop capacity including increasing the number of trained staff, establishment of community social groups such as IBAMA (expanded upon in other sections of this report) to expedite response and service provision within island communities, the establishment of a helpline for victims seeking support from MoSFD (1421) in 2020, and development of a mobile app (Madhadhugaaru) on reporting GBV launched in 2023. One of the key persistent gaps in support services and mechanisms to protect GBV victims is the lack of operational shelters for victims. Although mandated by law to establish and provide appropriate shelters for victims, presently there are none in the country which are fully operational for the purposes and standards required. However, under the SGII project in partnership with ADB, MoSFD is presently working on the establishment and operationalisation of shelters for GBV/DV shelters in 5 regions throughout the country.

Furthermore, there have been efforts made to expand provision of mental health services and legal aid for victims. In 2022, MoGFSS (now MoSFD) entered into a MOU with Hope for Women, a NGO focused on women's rights and gender equality, to provide legal aid and peer support group services for victims. The DVPA also stipulates that FPA must provide support services such as counselling and legal aid for victims. Although FPA does not presently have the capacity to provide services in-house, they have initiated these services via third parties. Legal aid service via a third party was initiated in 2023 and 24 clients have been provided support thus far, including 23 women. FPA also provides counselling for survivors, as per the DVPA and SOA, via a third party; a total of 164 clients have been referred for these services presently. However, FPA reports that they have a limited budget within which such service provisions can be made (with a cap of approximately 200,000 MVR per year), which restricts the scope of service provision.

There have also been significant efforts made by the Prosecutor General's Office (PGO) to ensure victims have access to information pertaining to their rights, court procedures and the law. PGO has a focused Victim Support Unit to guide victims and provide necessary support during the case. Additionally, PGO, in partnership with UNDP Maldives, developed a set of handbooks for victims on topics such as delivering witness testimony in court, witness and

victim support unit, and guidance for victims of sexual violence. These handbooks have also been developed in accessible formats, to ensure wider reach.

A critical area of concern in addressing GBV is the lack of sensitivity within stakeholders, including law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, media personnel, and other service providers. In particular, stakeholders noted that lack of sensitisation amongst police officers and judges can act as a hindrance to victims of GBV, as they may feel subject to stigmatisation and be discouraged from pursuing justice or redress. This has been recognised by the state, with measures taken by the police and the judiciary to enhance gender sensitivity amongst law enforcement officers and judges. The Family and Child Protection (FCP) department of the Maldives Policy Service has introduced a policy mandating the inclusion of a component on GBV-related issues, such as investigating through a victim-centred approach and what victims and witnesses should do in such cases, in all awareness programs conducted by FCP. There are specific modules on relevant laws such as DVPA covered in trainings for police officers. Additionally, the Department of Judicial Administration developed a comprehensive manual for training judges on the DVPA and the SOA, in 2021, with trainings having been conducted for two batches presently. There is also a gender sensitisation component included in the induction programme for judges, albeit a brief introductory session.

One significant challenge that became apparent during the review process is the incongruence of data on GBV across various institutions, due to inconsistencies in coding. This hinders accurate analysis on trends, which can be used to improve the understanding of extent, causes and consequences of VAW. While FPA, as the monitoring body under the DVPA, periodically produces statistical reports on a quarterly basis, which includes data disaggregated by sex, disability, age and other factors for both victims and perpetrators, FPA's purview is limited to the DVPA and to domestic violence cases. There is no coherent system to monitor and analyse patterns in other types of GBV, and insufficient resources and capacity within the agencies that currently maintain data to generate such analyses.

Additionally, one significant limitation in analysing the GBV trends in the Maldivian context is the lack of an in-depth study on the issue. The most recent study with a relevant and wide enough scope was conducted in 2007; while the DHS conducted in 2016-2017 has generated more recent data on prevalence of GBV, it is not comparative in scope and depth. An in-depth study on GBV is planned to be carried out by FPA and MBS, with questionnaires currently being developed; this study will be conducted in alignment with the SGII project.

## **17. In the past five years, what strategies has your country used to prevent gender-based violence?**

While the driving factors for GBV, particularly over the past five years, remains to be studied in-depth and analysed, normative narratives which justify or condone VAW can be attributed to the prevalence of GBV. The Rights Side of Life, a survey conducted by HRCM in partnership with FPA and UNDP, indicates a prevailing perception around women's subjugatory role and the justification of VAW. There is a worrying trend of violence against women being normalised or justified, due to perceived disobedience against her husband. The Rights Side of Life indicates that more women than men also hold the belief that women should be shown who is the boss, and that men have the right to hit his wife if she fails to obey him. Additionally, the study shows that a majority of people have a misconception that human rights and women's rights or gender equality are contradictory to Islam; this trend also appears to be growing and again women appear to carry this belief more than men do. This indicates that there is great need for advocacy to bring about changes in social norms, beliefs and attitudes, especially to change internalised perceptions by women about VAW being normal or justified.

With the increase in number of reported cases of gender-based violence and perceived increase in prevalence of such issues, including the worrying trends in beliefs and attitudes highlighted above, there has been a greater focus on prevention of gender-based violence over the past five years. This includes advocacy efforts conducted across the country, including a focused nationwide campaign launched by the Ministry, that aims to address the root causes or societal perceptions which normalise gender-based violence or violence against women.

Geveshi Gulhun, a campaign launched by the Ministry in 2020 and partially funded by the High Commission of Pakistan, broadly aims to address domestic violence by promoting positive messaging about strengthening domestic and familial relationships. The campaign was initiated in June 2020, partly in response to the growing incidents of GBV being reported to the state following the COVID-19 lockdown. This campaign used a variety of mediums targeted at different demographics to promote positive and non-violent family relationships and gender-equitable values and beliefs. This campaign was carried out across the whole country, with facilitators trained in every atoll, who were equipped with skills and knowledge on conducting awareness sessions on DV and strengthening family relationships. Across these trainings, a total of 413 people from 178 islands were trained, creating a pool of trainers who can sustain awareness activities and disseminate information across the Maldives.

In addition to training sessions, including training of facilitators, Geveshi Gulhun used a broad range of media strategies and advocacy materials to reach a wider audience. This includes development of short animation messages, a TV programme (Saasthura) with 12 episodes focusing on, a short film competition, a radio drama series, development of a story book series for children with messages on positive habits, a 2D cartoon series for children, sticker sets promoting positive messages, and a feature film focusing on the importance of family relationships and community support for victims. Geveshi Gulhun also incorporated a component on men engagement, including workshops for men, promotion of campaign messages in sporting events and other platforms where men generally partake. The campaign also integrated religious messaging, including a campaign conducted in Ramadan 1442H,

where video clips encouraging strengthening family relationships were shared via the social media platforms of MoGFSS and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

While no concrete impact analysis of the campaign has yet been conducted, there has been an increase in reported cases of GBV following the launch of the campaign. Given that the primary objective of the campaign is raising awareness on DV/GBV and to encourage people to speak up, this is perceived as a general success.

Over the past five years, FPA has also continuously carried out advocacy efforts, with a focus on domestic violence. Various advocacy sessions have been conducted for young people in particular, on healthy relationship skills including effective communication, setting boundaries, and consent. Workshops on this topic further include components on prevention of DV and gender sensitisation. Advocacy aimed at increasing parent awareness has also been carried out by FPA, with a handbook on how to protect children from sexual violence being developed, and sessions based on the handbook conducted across the country.

FPA also carried out an advocacy campaign under the name ‘Heylaa! Heylavvaa!’, which translated to ‘wake up, wake others’, focused on engaging individuals and communities in awareness and prevention of DV. This campaign was rolled out in 2021 and 2022 with the objective of addressing DV from a religious and cultural point of view, instilling public consciousness on patriarchal attitudes and toxic masculinity in marriage and intimate relationships as harmful, and increasing public awareness on important component of DVPA. As part of this campaign, workshops were conducted targeting university students, a radio drama series was developed and disseminated, a short film competition focusing on DV was conducted for the public, and animated graphics to address patriarchal attitudes as well as flashcards with important information on the DVPA were developed and disseminated to the public, including on social media platforms.

Across these campaigns and other initiatives, strategies used have included promotion of non-violent relationships, positive parenting and religious messaging as well.

**18. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to prevent and respond to technology-facilitated gender-based violence (e.g. online sexual harassment, online stalking, non-consensual sharing of intimate images)?**

There has been an emerging trend of increase in cases of GBV facilitated via technology, over the past five years. Crime statistics published by MPS from 2020 to 2023 show that a total of 448 blackmail cases and a total of 348 cases of blackmail using sexual or intimate images were investigated. While the highest numbers were reported in 2020, with a decrease in 2021 and a more significant decline in 2022, there has been an increase in blackmail cases in 2023, with 110 total cases and 78 cases of blackmail involving nude images. At present, it is difficult to discern numbers on other types online sexual harassment and online stalking, due to an incongruence in how crime statistics are coded and reported. However, the increase in online blackmailing and blackmailing using intimate images is in itself a growing concern.

One of the greatest concerns with the increase in such cases is that victims often feel reluctant to report or have the cases investigated for fear of repercussion, both from the perpetrator and via societal stigma. While the Maldives does have the capacity, including the legal framework and technical resources to investigate cybercrime, congruent with patterns for other types of GBV, there are issues in gathering evidence and building a strong prosecution case in situations wherein victims do not wish to pursue cases and do not cooperate with investigations.

Given the limitations in responding to such cases, in consideration of the victim's dignity as well as lack of evidence base for prosecution, much of the work to address technology-facilitated GBV is currently concentrated in prevention. To this end, the Maldives Police Service, in partnership with Ministry of Education, conducts targeted awareness sessions in schools, with a focus on anti-bullying and internet safety.

The Ministry of Education also has stringent monitoring mechanisms in place to prevent misuse of technological devices in school settings. The Ministry has the apparatus to remotely monitor devices used by students, as well as any tools used during online teaching including private tuition centres. However, there are challenges in monitoring compliance due to limited capacity.

At present, there is not a significant body of literature or research on online or technology-facilitated GBV in the Maldives. Given the rapid digitalisation and concurrent trend of increase in such cases, it is important that there are more in-depth analyses of the issue conducted to better understand the magnitude, drivers and consequences, and to establish sufficient mechanisms to prevent and respond to such crimes.

**19. In the past five years, what measures has your country taken to resource women's organizations working to prevent and respond to GBV?**

While state agencies generally work in partnership with women's organisations and non-governmental organisations to carry out activities that focus on GBV, due to the limited budgetary resources available within the government apparatus, this partnership usually does not occur in the form of funding activities or organisations. However, in-kind support is provided, such as facilitating training opportunities for NGO personnel, and provision of technical support in various areas.

A majority of initiatives undertaken to address GBV and other issues pertaining to gender equality generally are collaborative in nature. In 2022, for example, MoGFSS (now MoSFD) and FPA partnered with a number of NGOs working on gender equality and women's rights to host a multi-stakeholder forum on sexual and gender-based violence. State agencies also work in consultation with NGOs in developing policies and action plans, and in turn, provide assistance to NGOs in their advocacy. This includes active engagement in events and discussions hosted by NGOs, facilitation of awareness sessions, and provision of technical input for surveys and research projects carried out by NGOs.

Additionally, state institutions such as MoSFD and the Family Protection Authority work in partnership or via memorandums of understanding with NGOs to enhance the provision of services for GBV survivors. The Ministry, for example, entered into a MoU with Hope for Women, a women's rights focused NGO, to provide legal services to victims seeking assistance from the Ministry. Similarly, FPA's legal aid service is provided via a third-party NGO.

While there is strong partnership amongst state actors and NGOs working on women's rights and prevention of GBV, a significant challenge in expanding the support provided to such organisations lies in the limited financial resources available via the state budget.

**20. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to address the portrayal of women and girls, discrimination and/or gender bias in the media, including social media?**

With media being a key socialising agent, and one of the propagators of social norms such as gender roles, addressing gender-based discrimination and gender bias within the media is critical to advance women's rights and gender equality outcomes. This includes ensuring equitable representation of women in the media industry and gender-sensitive and responsible content creation and portrayal of women in the media. The Maldives has several regulatory bodies with a purview of monitoring media content and regulating media industries, including the Maldives Broadcasting Commission (MBC) and the Maldives Media Council (MMC).

At present, monitoring of broadcasting content is done per stipulations provided in the Maldives Broadcasting Commission's Code of Practice, endorsed in 2012; this code of practice has a specific guideline on the promotion of women's rights in broadcasting, which addresses several key issues such as gender stereotypes, including portrayal of women as dependent on or subjugatory to men, endorsing or condoning VAW, or portrayals of women which disrepute their dignity or sexually objectify them. MBC reports that they received and attended to cases of gender bias or discrimination in content, and indicate that the existent regulatory framework provides them sufficient avenues to address such issues within their mandate. However, an analysis of cases reported within the past five years to MBC indicate that there are minimal number of cases on gender issues and that in these cases, the decision made by the MBC is that the code of practice was not contravened; in such cases, dispute resolution processes are initiated if a review is requested and the parties come into an agreement. In one incident, the recipient of the case publicly acknowledged wrongdoing, retracted the statements made during the broadcast and issued an apology. However, as the official investigation did not find that the code of practice has been violated, there is no statistical data to indicate that the principles or clauses pertaining to gender equality within the code of practice had been contravened. It is therefore difficult to capture the actual prevalence of cases of gender discrimination in the media, even when they are lodged within a monitoring body.

Additionally, MMC has reported they have never received a case on gender discrimination or bias for content monitoring or appraisal. It is possible that a lack of reporting on such cases is due to lack of awareness amongst the public and media professionals that such issues can be reported for investigation. MMC also notes that they face great limitations in enforcing measures against non-compliant media houses and that there are significant gaps within the existent guidelines, which do not presently explicitly allow for avenues to penalise offenders in a substantial manner.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is largely online media and social media platforms which are used to propagate discriminatory content. As these cases fall within the purview of MMC, there is an imminent need to strengthen their legislative authority and monitoring framework to efficiently address such practices. MMC, under its Strategic Action Plan, has developed a paper on the existent legislative gaps and presented the findings to the Parliament, with the aim of developing a stronger legislative framework such as enacting a specific law under which MMC will govern, and a stronger code of ethics.

In addition to the Broadcasting Act (Law No. 16/2010), the MBC's code of practice, and the MMC's code of ethics, as well as provisions under certain statutory laws such as the Child Rights Protection Act, there have been efforts initiated by non-governmental organisations to develop a voluntary guideline to promote gender sensitivity amongst the media. However, this guideline is yet to be endorsed as a need for greater localisation and contextualisation was identified. Additionally, consultations with the media regulatory bodies indicate that a voluntary code of conduct adopted by media houses themselves may not necessarily have the desired outcome, as there is little incentive for compliance. It is therefore recommended that any guidelines developed are endorsed and enforced by the state and the regulatory bodies, with proper monitoring and compliance mechanisms in place.

In conjunction with more comprehensive regulatory frameworks and guidelines, there is a need for capacity building and trainings on gender sensitivity amongst media professionals. This has been highlighted by stakeholders from various areas, who note the key role media play as socialising agents. The review process indicates that there have been initiatives to carry out media sensitisation programs, with a focus on different areas including VAW over the past five years. However, a noted lack of commitment or support from media professionals has not resulted in the most favourable outcomes for such programmes. There thus needs to be measures taken to incentivise media houses and professionals to engage in gender sensitisation programs and commit to gender-sensitivity within the media.



**21. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken specifically tailored to address violence against marginalized groups of women and girls?**

Given the geographic dispersion of the Maldives, one key concern for policymakers is ensuring access to services for those in outer-lying atolls or rural areas. While a majority of services continue to be concentrated in the capital Male', there are presently offices of the Ministry of Social and Family Development – known as Family and Children Service Centres – located in 19 out of the 20 atolls in the Maldives. The remaining atoll, Kaafu Atoll, has services provided by the main Ministry office in Male'. The FCSCs provide a broad range of services, including support for GBV victims, support for people with disabilities and older people including those who are bedridden, advocacy and awareness programs on various issues such as GBV and gender equality.

Additionally, the past five years has seen the establishment of community social groups (IBAMA), an inter-agency mechanism that works at a local island level to identify, prevent and respond to social issues including GBV. IBAMA consists of stakeholders within each island including representatives from the local council, the Women's Development Committee, the Ministry of Social and Family Development or Family and Children Service Centre, the school, health centre or hospital, police, and the Department of Juvenile Justice.

At present, IBAMA groups have been established in nearly all islands across 14 atolls, with a total of 122 islands out of 128 islands in these atolls being covered; there are 6 remaining atolls where initial training for IBAMA members need to be provided and IBAMA groups yet to be established. IBAMA groups will be further mobilised to carry out vulnerability mapping in the islands with focus on child protection, disability, the elderly, and gender-based violence or domestic violence. IBAMA is conceptualised to both act as a preventative mechanism, wherein early warning signs or can be easily identified in local communities, and as a responsive team which can expedite the provision of social services to those in need. As highlighted elsewhere in this report, the geographic dispersion of the country presents a challenge in nearly all areas, particularly in ensuring quality services. Developing the capacity of IBAMA team members is therefore expected to increase the amount of those working across the country, at island level, who are equipped with relevant knowledge on interventions needed to address issues faced by marginalised groups, including in cases of GBV.

Efforts have also been made to enhance accessibility of advocacy materials on GBV and increase awareness amongst vulnerable communities, such as people with disabilities and migrant workers. FPA has adapted selected awareness videos on DV prevention to include sign language interpretation and subtitles in English and Dhivehi. In 2023, sessions to create awareness on GBV and the relevant laws were conducted to PWDs, by MoGFSS (now MoSFD) and FPA. A total of 41 participants from various groups such as the blind community, deaf community took part in these sessions.

Summary handbooks on the DVPA have also been developed in 6 different languages (Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Sinhalese, Tagalog, Thai) and disseminated across the country and to NGOs and organisations working with migrants. However, challenges remain in ensuring accessibility of materials and programs conducted, such as limitations in resources to translate necessary documents and lack of sign language interpreters in the country.

Additionally, as highlighted elsewhere in this report, strong legislative measures have also been introduced to prevent and respond to cases of violence against children, including girls. The enactment of the Child Rights Protection Act prohibits marriage for children under the age of 18. The Juvenile Justice Act further protects the rights of children who come into conflict with the law, ensuring that they are not subject to disproportionate punishment within the criminal justice system.

**22. In the past five years, what actions and measures has your country to promote women’s participation in public life and decision-making?**

Maldives has seen a gradual rise in women’s representation and participation in decision-making over the past five years, but challenges persist in generating gender equality outcomes and ensuring equitable participation in public life. This is apparent in the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report of 2023, where the area in which Maldives reported the lowest score was for Political Empowerment with a score of 0.139, impacting the overall gender parity score and ranking. However, the score for this index improved from 0.111 in 2020 to 0.139 in 2023, indicating a progressive trend in enabling women’s political representation.

Consistent efforts have been exerted over the past five years to promote equitable participation and representation of women and men in decision-making and governance. This includes the very first introduction of a legislative quota for women, via the milestone amendment to the Decentralisation Act (Law No. 7/2010) in 2019 which reserved 33% of seats in local councils for women. The quota brought about a significant increase in women’s representation at local governance, with the representation of female councillors increasing from 6.1% in 2017 to 39.7% at present.

While the amendment to the Decentralisation Act sets a precedent for establishing legislative quotas and reserved seats at national elections, it also emphasises the need to strengthen advocacy and awareness to ensure that temporary special measures such as quotas translates to transformative and meaningful change towards equitable participation in decision-making and governance at all levels. A recent ‘Assessment on Gender Dynamics in Local Governance: Insights from Female Council Members’ by Local Government Authority (LGA) reported that the perception of the community towards women in elected positions was slowly becoming more positive.<sup>20</sup> The assessment also highlighted direct and unintended negative outcome of the quota mainly stemming from a widespread belief among both men and women that women can only contest for the reserved seats as these are the “female” seats. The adverse result of this misconception is that, although a small number of women were represented at senior levels (i.e. council president) within the councils prior to the amendment, there were no women elected to council presidency following the 2021 Local Council elections. Subsequently, there was a lack of representation of women at atoll council level, which compromises of a voter-elected atoll council president and voter-elected presidents from island councils within the atoll. At present, there is a single female atoll councillor, who was elected in 2024 as the atoll council president via a by-election. The findings of the assessment also highlight the influence of gender roles on the division of responsibilities, with many female council members undertaking stereotypically feminine roles.

The precedent set by the quota for local councils can also be instrumental in shaping the dialogue when advocating for temporary special measures to address the low level of women in legislature, at the Parliament. The current Parliament comprises of 93 members, out of which

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<sup>20</sup> Assessment validated and findings shared with stakeholders, but yet to be published

only 3 are women. While 41 female candidates contested for the Parliament during this election, only 7.3% were able to confirm their seats. Existent advocacy efforts have focused on creating dialogue within political parties to internally take measures to support female candidates; there is a general consensus amongst the stakeholders consulted during this review that there should be measures such as internal quotas in place within parties to ensure women candidates are backed by parties.

In contrast to the decline in women representation at the parliament, a positive trend is seen in the judiciary, with the percentage of female magistrates and judges currently at 16%; notably, this figure surpasses the target of 15% set out to be achieved by 2026 in the GEAP. Although there is no ascribed policy that this trend can be attributed to, as the Judicial Service Commission appoints judges using a gender-neutral process, there is an observed shift towards more positive perceptions and acceptance of women judges. Much of this is associated with efforts by the Judicial Service Commission and Department of Judicial Administration to ensure gender equitable representation of the judiciary, including all messaging via media platforms and promoting women in the judiciary as role models.

The past five years has also seen an increase in targeted capacity building opportunities for women and youth including those specifically tailored to generate interest in the judiciary and parliamentary roles. Practice Parliament for Women is a training programme conducted by UNDP Maldives, in partnership with the People's Majlis, exclusively aimed at women, with the aim of building their capacity and confidence to participate in democratic processes and encourage them to contest for elected positions. Initiated in 2022, the programme has trained 180 women over multiple batches thus far. The Judiciary for Juniors programme, conducted by UNDP Maldives in partnership with JSC and DJA, aims to attract young people towards careers in the judicial sector including judgeship. This programme has been carried out in two batches so far, with a total of 37 participants (28 girls, 9 boys) in 2022 and 36 participants (19 girls and 17 boys) in 2023. While these programmes are not tailored or targeted towards a specific gender, the greater number of girls participating in these initiatives suggests an increase in interest amongst girls to enter the judiciary.

The past five years has generally generated favourable outcomes for women, and a number of promising initiatives have been launched over this period; however, Maldives still has much progress to make in increasing women's participation in decision-making and leadership. While the 2022 Census indicates that the proportion of women in managerial roles has increased to 23%, compared to 2022% per the 2019 HIES, this is a marginal increase. At present, 5 out of 32 SOEs have female Managing Directors, with some of having significant portfolios such as SDFC, Aasandha, and Public Service Media (PSM). The government is committed to ensuring greater representation of women in governance, both within government agencies and SOEs.

**23. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to increase women’s access to expression and participation in decision-making in the media, including through information and communication technologies (ICT)?**

Women in the Maldives do not have significant barriers to participating in media and ICT professions, although some of the systemic issues relating to women bearing a greater domestic and care burden that is observed in all areas is also present in these fields.

Stakeholders consulted reported that there are no significant barriers for women to engage in the media profession, noting that a significant portion of media professionals, particularly in the broadcasting area, are women. This includes those in managerial or policy-making roles, including senior journalists, station heads, as well as representatives of media governing bodies. The Maldives Broadcasting Commission, comprised of 7 members, currently have 5 female commissioners, including the President of the Commission. The Maldives Media Council however has only one female member out of 15 members total (2 seats are vacant at present), which indicates a very low level of representation in this body. One significant reason for such a discrepancy in the composition of the MBC and the MMC is that commissioners are appointed to the MBC by the President, following selection and endorsement by the Parliament, whereas MMC is comprised of members elected from amongst media professionals. Given that these positions are elected, there is a reported lack of women who contest for council membership.

Additionally, despite generally positive perceptions about opportunities for women in media including acknowledgement of widely-adopted policies such as paid maternity leave and flexibility for working mothers, an assessment of ‘Gender Equality in Maldives Media’ conducted by the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA)<sup>21</sup> found that there were gender discriminatory practices such as pay disparity amongst men and women, and issues of sexual harassment and impunity, and perpetuation of beliefs such as women underperforming or being incapable of carrying out tasks such as covering protests. The survey also reports that women represent approximately 30% of both total staff and management level within mainstream news organisations, suggesting that while women may appear to be the ‘face’ of the media, their overall representation and decision-making role within the field is still significantly lower compared to men.

In terms of opportunities for women within the ICT field, there have been efforts to increase visibility of women in the sector and conduct high-level advocacy for women and girls to join the field. In 2023, in conjunction with International Women’s Day and in alignment with the theme ‘DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality’, the then-Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Technology launched a platform to recognise and celebrating the achievements of women and women’s contribution to the digital and technology sector was launched<sup>22</sup>. This platform was created as a means to inspire women in the digital sector and those aspiring to join the field.

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<sup>21</sup> Maldives Journalists Association (2022). Gender Equality in Maldives Media.

<sup>22</sup> <https://women.digital.gov.mv/>

Additionally, gender-responsive policies have been adopted by corporations within the ICT field. Dhiraagu, the national telecom service provider, promotes gender equality via mentoring programs, training initiatives and leadership opportunities for women. To enhance a gender-responsive workplace, Dhiraagu also adopted a gender action plan in 2022. The gender action plan includes initiatives such flexible working, returnship guidelines, mentorship and coaching, increasing female representation in technical roles, apprentice programmes and in managerial roles.

Commitments from corporate entities and high-level officials are seen as encouraging measures for women and girls who aspire to join fields they are under-represented in and suggest the establishment welcoming environment for them to express themselves and participate in.

**24. Please describe your country's current national women's machinery (government entity exclusively dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women) and describe the measures that your country taken over the past five years to establish and/or strengthen it.**

The national women's machinery in the Maldives currently comprises of a department within the Ministry of Social and Family Development, formerly known as the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services. During the current reporting period, the ministry underwent a change in name following the change in administration in November 2023, but the mandate of the ministry has remained the same, including social protection and social services, and addressing the needs of vulnerable groups including children, people with disabilities, older persons, and women. Under this mandate, the ministry – and particularly the Gender Affairs Department – is responsible for leading national-level efforts on gender equality, women empowerment and gender mainstreaming. The Gender Affairs Department, which has existed in various forms within the ministry, was formally established under section 41 of the Gender Equality Act (Law No. 18/2016). The department is mandated to do the following: preventing gender-based violence against women and raising awareness on such violence; establishing gender equality and raising awareness on gender equality; establishing a mechanism of cooperation between institutions and entities who have been granted responsibilities under the present Act and other stakeholders; and coordinating the work done by different parties on establishing gender equality such that it is carried out under a national policy.

Despite the establishment of the Gender Affairs Department via legislation, there remain significant challenges for the national women's machinery to fully carry out its mandate. Given the broad scope of work, there have been consistent issues with resource allocation, including the limited number of human resources as well as limitations within the current legislative framework to fully exercise power. Budgetary limitations have resulted in a challenge in expanding the human resource capacity within the department, which severely impedes the department's functionality.

At present, the resources allocated to the work of the department is under the budget line ascribed to the Ministry of Social and Family Development. The current budget allocated to the department for the year 2024 is MVR 7,259,896, which is 2.88% of the Ministry's budget, 0.21% of the budget assigned to the social sector, and 0.02% of the government budget.<sup>23</sup> While this represents a very small proportion of the government budget, there are several other entities, including the implementing agencies under GEAP, whose work contribute to attainment of gender equality outcomes and other work led by the NWM. However, as mentioned elsewhere in this report, it is difficult to identify how much of these resources allocated go towards gender-related outcomes and activities.

While the Gender Affairs Department was established in 2016, a number of policies and documents which make up the framework under which the Gender Affairs Department's work is carried out were only formulated or endorsed within the past five years. This includes the

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<https://www.finance.gov.mv/public/attachments/TyrM9tMpUIOB9mqgi6LeZ0F6qZb2DyTMfRSctBRR.pdf>

introduction of the National Gender Policy in September 2019, as mandated under Section 42 of the GEA, and the subsequent formulation and roll-out of the national Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) in 2022. Introduction of these instruments have enabled the NWM to work on focused areas with set targets, but challenges remain in implementation, including the limited number of staff.

In addition to the work carried out by the Gender Affairs Department, several entities, both ascribed to the Ministry or departments within the Ministry, as well as local government bodies, are mandated to carry out work related to gender equality and women empowerment. This includes the Social Services Department of MoSFD – which attends to all cases reported to the Ministry, pertaining to adults, including GBV cases – Family Protection Authority, which is the monitoring body for the DVPA, and the Women’s Development Committees established in all islands. WDCs are mandated to carry out activities to empower women in their respective islands. Additionally, per the regulation to assign responsibilities under the Gender Equality Act to Local Councils, the MoSFD has the discretion to assign responsibilities such as implementing GEAP and the NGP to local councils, within their jurisdiction. While the gender architecture in the Maldives therefore includes several elements, much of the work carried out is currently concentrated in the Gender Affairs Department, with a need to further develop capacity of other key actors to mainstream gender.



**25. In the past five years, what other mechanisms and tools has your country used to mainstream gender equality across sectors? (e.g. gender focal points in the Executive, Legislature or Judiciary; inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms; gender audits, consultations with women’s organizations)**

With the roll-out of the Gender Equality Action Plan, a number of measures were taken to institutionalise gender mainstreaming and strengthen existing inter-agency coordination mechanisms. This includes a layered approach, through formation of a network of gender focal points, as well as technical and high-level steering committees for the implementation of the Gender Equality Action Plan.

Following the endorsement of the GEAP in February 2022, the Cabinet also endorsed the formulation of a high-level steering committee to act as the apex monitoring body under the implementation framework for the GEAP. The Steering Committee initially comprised of 13 members, including the President, Vice President, the Attorney General, Cabinet Ministers who held portfolios related to gender, the economy, finance, health, education, youth, as well as the Chair of the Judicial Services Commission, and the Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and Gender, along with the heads of the Local Government Authority and the Maldives Bureau of Statistics. Following the change in administration in November 2023, the Steering Committee re-convened in January 2024 after its composition was revised. At present, the Steering Committee has 9 members, with the Vice President acting as the chair, and including Cabinet Ministers who hold portfolios related to gender, higher education, the economy, finance, health, homeland security and technology, along with the Chair of the Judicial Services Commission. This recomposition was brought about due to changes in mandates of ministers with the change in administration.

The GEAP Technical Committee is currently comprised of 21 members representing various stakeholders including state agencies, a representative from a SOE and 2 representatives from CSOs. The Technical Committee’s primary role is to develop the annual work plans and quarterly monitoring reports for GEAP’s implementation. However, over the course of the GEAP’s implementation, there have been several issues noted in the functionality and efficiency of the Technical Committee. While allowing for a variety of stakeholders to be represented on an advisory committee is perceived as positive, having a committee with a significantly high number of members causes administrative difficulties in organising meetings, with concerns about quorums and representations mismatching the discussion areas under focus. At present, the Ministry is working on the development of a proposal to re-structure the institutional mechanisms for the GEAP’s roll-out and monitoring; this will include formation of separate technical advisory groups for the different policy goals and areas under the GEAP, to ensure more relevant representation.

While a network of gender focal points, primarily mobilised for the coordination of international reporting such as CEDAW reporting, has existed within the national gender architecture, the Gender Equality Action Plan outlined rolling out a mechanism called the ‘Maldivian Gender Equality Model’ (MGEM). Under this model, the government seeks to establish a network of MGEM advocates, who are focal points from government ministries and agencies (including the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches). The MGEM advocates’

primary role is to coordinate with the NWM, coordinate within their agencies to ensure gender perspectives are integrated into planning and programming, including the collected of sex-disaggregated data, and ensuring compliance with laws and regulations pertaining to gender equality and sexual harassment.

The MGEM guideline was endorsed by the GEAP high-level Steering Committee in November 2022. Following the endorsement of the guideline, the national women's machinery led the process of identifying MGEM advocates from line ministries and selected government agencies in 2023. In June 2023, an initial training session was carried out for MGEM advocates, with a focus on gender sensitisation and orienting them on the MGEM and their role as MGEM advocates. While further trainings, with a focus on developing technical skills amongst the advocates on gender mainstreaming were planned for 2023, these activities were not carried out due to the difficulty in scheduling events in the midst of the Presidential elections in 2023.

Following the change in administration in November 2023, including significant changes amongst policy-level officials in a majority of state institutions, the national women's machinery began efforts to re-mobilise the MGEM advocates. Accordingly, new nominations for MGEM advocates were sought. At present, 97 MGEM advocates across 50 institutions, including 19 line Ministries, have been appointed. These advocates will be oriented on their role and provided further training including gender sensitisation and necessary technical skills to carry out gender mainstreaming tasks.

In 2023, the Ministry led the process of conducting two in-depth sectoral gender audits, focusing on the health and judicial sectors. These audits were carried out with the support of UNDP Maldives, via an international consultant as part of the GEAP's implementation, which outlines that a sectoral gender audit be conducted for every year during the GEAP's implementation period. As there were difficulties in carrying out the audit in 2022, it was decided that two sectors would be audited simultaneously during 2023. Although a gender equality diagnostic of selected sectors was conducted by ADB in 2014, these gender audits were the first in-depth gender audits conducted in the Maldives. Findings from these audits indicated a severe discrepancy in the level of gender mainstreaming across sectors. While there was a generally positive assessment on the level of gender mainstreaming in the judicial sector, there were concerns about a lack of institutionalisation or integration of gender mainstreaming at a substantive level in the health sector. The findings of these reports are yet to be published, with plans to coordinate with the sectoral agencies to map out how the findings and recommendations can be adopted in the future.

As outlined in the GEAP, additional sectoral gender audits are planned to be conducted during the implementation period of the GEAP in the following sectors: education, police and law enforcement, and local government. These sectors have been selected based on their relevance to the work conducted under the five GEAP policy goals.

**26. If there is a national human rights institution in your country, what measures has it taken to address violations of women’s rights and promote gender equality?**

The Human Rights Commission of the Maldives (HRCM) was established in 2003, under a presidential decree, as an autonomous statutory body. HRCM was established as a constitutionally established autonomous body, and the Human Rights Commission Act (Law No. 6/2006) further provided HRCM constitutional backing and autonomy as well as a mandate based on universal human rights standards. HRCM has a broad mandate including investigation of violations of human rights, monitoring laws, regulations, policies and practices to flag issues which contravene human rights, and overall development of a culture of human rights in the Maldives, including the promotion and preservation of human rights. Under this mandate, HRCM has a purview on gender equality and women’s rights.

The majority of the work undertaken by HRCM to promote gender equality and address violations of women’s rights is through their advocacy sessions. HRCM has carried out sessions focused on a variety of themes and focus areas including gender equality and women empowerment, children’s rights, GBV, and the rights of vulnerable groups. These sessions have been targeted at demographics and groups such as school students, parents and teachers, educators, WDCs and local councils. Trainings are also conducted for human rights defenders with a focus on vulnerable groups’ rights and human rights approach. HRCM also carries out sessions on human rights approach, vulnerable groups, and anti-torture for law enforcement officers, medical professionals, and care-takers within state institutions. Additionally, HRCM conducts awareness sessions on sexual harassment and the PSAHA for employees of state and private institutions, including trainings for members of PSAH committees.

While the work currently undertaken already includes a broad range of focus areas and target groups, HRCM notes challenges in conducting effective programs to promote gender equality. Lack of funding, for example, is a key barrier to conducting awareness programs such as workshops, defenders’ trainings in person. Additionally, more funding is required to conduct programs in island communities, aimed at councils, WDCs and staff in state care facilities.

Additionally, in its role as a monitoring body, HRCM engages in the review and reporting process for various international treaties that the Maldives is party to, including CEDAW. As the national human rights institution, HRCM submitted a shadow report on the progress of CEDAW implementation during the 6th reporting period in 2021. HRCM also conducts periodic monitoring on the implementation of recommendations under treaties such as CEDAW, on an annual or biennial basis. Monitoring is also conducted for key events such as elections, and HRCM has produced reports including recommendations on increasing women’s participation in party governance due to limited participation observed during the elections.

Within its monitoring work, HRCM also conducts assessments on the conditions of women in detention facilities, as well as FCSCs, where women are to be kept in state care. Through these visits, HRCM has highlighted issues such as lack of female nurses and availability of sanitary products in prisons, as well as other issues of abuse and inequitable access to trainings for prisons due to disability, noting that some of its recommendations have resulted in improved conditions.

As part of its mandate to develop a culture of human rights, HRCM also carries out surveys and research activities; while not specific to women's rights or gender equality, many of these studies include a gender component and capture key information on the status of women's rights in the Maldives. The Rights Side of Life, a perception study carried out over three periods in 2006, 2011, and 2020, has remained seminal in analysis on evolving societal perceptions around issues such as domestic violence and gender equality. A fourth iteration of this study is planned to be conducted in the near future and is expected to inform further analysis on societal perceptions on gender equality, human rights and GBV.

It is evident that in its advocacy, monitoring and research activities, HRCM carries out substantial efforts to promote gender equality and women's rights.

**27. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to build and sustain peace, promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development and implement the women, peace and security agenda?**

The Maldives, contrary to many other countries in the region, does not face significant conflict situations including armed conflict. The primary concerns for the Maldives in terms of peace and security are tied to growing trends of extremism and radicalisation. In recognition of the threat posed by extremism, the Maldives has established a legislative framework and a mechanism to counter violent extremism and promote social cohesion, through the enactment of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (Law No. 32/2015). Under Article 19 of this Act, the President was mandated to assign an agency with the responsibility of coordination national efforts against terrorism and violent extremism. Accordingly, the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) was established via a Presidential decree in February 2016. NCTC coordinates action plans on preventing violent extremism, strategic communication against terrorism and extremism and nationalism terrorism response.

The National Action Plan on Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism (NAP) was rolled out in 2020 with implementation planned until 2024. This action plan identifies addressing gender issues, particularly the role of women in radicalisation, their experience of extremism and their impact on deradicalisation, as a key area. Additionally, the NAP sets out a principle wherein actions to prevent violent extremism developed under the NAP and other policies will be reviewed by young women and men, and that gender equality is ensured. Gender is also integrated into the NAP as a key element, with recognition that the different needs of women and girls as well as men and boys must be considered. The NAP further outlines that while women are, in some cases, victims of extremism, they can also play a key role in fundraising, ideological indoctrination and radicalisation, noting that gender is a key issue with relevance to masculinity and control. Accordingly, there are specific interventions aimed at women under this NAP, including addressing the specific needs of women during rehabilitation and deradicalisation.

Women also play a key role in preventing extremism and radicalisation within communities. Women within island communities, especially members of the WDCs, can particularly play an important outreach role, and are perceived as being approachable for assistance; they can play a role in identifying outgroups and bringing them back into society. The NCTC has carried out capacity-building programs for WDCs in 19 atolls thus far, with the aim of ensuring community-level engagement and early identification and intervention of concerning cases. NCTC also coordinates with IBAMA groups where established and have provided trainings focused on identification of social vulnerability.

**28. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to increase the leadership, representation and participation of women in conflict prevention, resolution, peacebuilding, humanitarian action and crisis response, at decision-making levels in situations of armed and other conflicts, and in fragile or crisis settings?**

The progress made over the past five years in increased representation of women in leadership is also applicable to the security sector and peacebuilding arena. During the review period, from 2019 to 2023, a female Minister held the title of Minister of Defence for the first time in the Maldives. Over the past five years, there have also been monumental milestones in terms of women's leadership within the governance structure of the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF), the primary agency responsible for national security in the Maldives. Women were appointed to the advisory council of the MNDF, in 2021; the national advisory council is established for policy-making in relation to the administrative and operational functions of MNDF as well as to present recommendations to the Minister of Defence and the Chief of Defence Force. Additionally, although the population within the MNDF is still largely male-dominated, the recruitment of female officers has increased by 25%, and the promotion of female officers has increased by 50%.<sup>24</sup> While no specific policies on women's leadership and representation in the MNDF have been introduced, steps have been taken to ensure that women are represented in all decision-making bodies within MNDF, with at least one woman being appointed to all executive boards in MNDF.

Not limited to armed conflict, women also play a critical role in crisis response in the Maldives. As highlighted elsewhere, women are often at the frontline when it comes to crises related to environmental degradation and climate change. Women also played a crucial role during the COVID-19 crisis, with women at the leadership of the Health Emergency Operation Centre, the Health Protection Agency and in the frontlines as medical professionals. As highlighted elsewhere, women also play a critical role in response to climate crises. In consideration of the disproportionate burden borne by women in crises response, measures have been taken to further integrate gender perspectives in crises management, such as DRR.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://en.sun.mv/77572>

**29. In the last five years, what actions has your country taken to enhance judicial and non-judicial accountability for violations of international humanitarian law and violations of the human rights of women and girls in situations of armed and other conflicts or humanitarian action and crisis response?**

As outlined in the NAP, gender issues and the specific needs of women and girls must be taken into account during efforts to counter and prevent violent extremism. This includes identifying their needs and addressing them during the rehabilitation and reintegration process. At present, rehabilitation and reintegration is done via the National Reintegration Centre, which was established in 2020. Amendments brought to the anti-terrorism legislation mandates that returning fighters be placed in detection and mandatory rehabilitation programs. Notably, a majority of those being repatriated are women and children, primarily those widowed and orphaned within conflict areas. Rehabilitation is seen as an essential step to ensure that radicalisation is not further spread into the general populace; it is also used to ascertain whether those returning from conflict areas can be reintegrated into society, or will need to face criminal justice.

Pathways for justice within the security sector were also broadened by the establishment of the military justice system in 2021. Through this mechanism, avenues for redress for issues such as sexual harassment and discrimination are available. The military justice system has been established to provide all parties involved in a case the opportunity to receive legal aid from the registration of a case. The system also provides a two-stage appeal process. Under this system, MNDF notes that cases of sexual harassment have been investigated and redress mechanisms include administrative penalties such as suspension.

Over the past five years, there have also been efforts to address human trafficking. An increase in human trafficking cases has been observed over the past five years, with a high number of women victims. Nearly all cases of human trafficking where women were victims involved sexual exploitation, with some cases involving forced labour and one case of forced marriage. A significant concern with trafficking cases is that often these cases are not prosecuted or even fully investigated, as suspected victims often leave the country once the case is identified. However, in cases that are flagged on suspicion of trafficking, victims are provided support such as shelter, food, medical and legal aid, and translation services, and assistance with repatriation. The Maldives is also presently working on amending the Prevention of Human Trafficking Act (Law No. 12/2013), as well as the Victim Identification Guideline from 2016. There are efforts to strengthen the regulatory framework by establishing additional guidelines and SOPs to combat human trafficking in the Maldives.

While not focused on trafficking of women and girls, but on human trafficking broadly, the Anti-Trafficking in Persons (TiP) Office has carried out several activities to increase awareness amongst law enforcement agencies and the general public on human trafficking. In 2021 and 2022, human trafficking awareness sessions were conducted in two different atolls, as part of the Hafthaares program. In 2023, a human trafficking awareness workshop under the name Shikaara was conducted for participants from law enforcement agencies, SOEs, and NGOs. The Maldives Police Service has conducted human trafficking awareness trainings for police officers and every year Maldives Immigration carries out training modules on human

trafficking for new officers who join the organisation. In addition to programs aimed at law enforcement, the Anti-TiP Office also conducted a media sensitisation session in 2024, to create awareness on human trafficking amongst media, including how to identify victims of trafficking, and how to report such cases and produce articles related to human trafficking. Efforts to increase awareness on human trafficking are planned to be further expanded, in alignment with the strategic action plan, which includes conducting a series of trainings for law enforcement officials and front line officials, NGOs and CSOs on strengthening identification, investigation and criminalisation of human trafficking crimes, as well as raise public awareness of human trafficking for migrant workers, via collaborations with CSOs and increasing social media campaigns to generate more awareness.



**30. In the last five years, what actions has your country taken to eliminate discrimination against and violations of the rights of the girl child, including adolescent girls?**

The Maldives ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1991, being amongst the first to sign and ratify the convention. Maldives is also party to the Optional Protocols to the CRC.

In alignment with the commitments under CRC, the Maldives has made significant strides to strengthen the protection of child rights, and advancements in elimination of violation of the rights of the girl child. Of particular significance is the enactment of the Child Rights Protection Act (Law No. 19/2019) in 2020, which provided a legal framework that prohibits child labour, child marriage, and death penalty in cases of children who come into conflict with the law. The CRPA further established the Children's Ombudsperson's Office, to monitor the implementation of the law and oversee all matters related to children's rights.

Furthermore, the Maldives enacted the Juvenile Justice Act (Law No. 18/2019), which establishes a juvenile justice system separate from the criminal justice system. The Act serves to outline the rights of children who come into conflict with the law, or are engaged in cycles of violence and juvenile delinquency, and means to prevent juvenile delinquency and rehabilitate juvenile delinquents.

Under this Act, a Department of Juvenile Justice was established, with the law further stipulating that the following mechanisms be constituted to maximise protection for juveniles: specialised police department to address juvenile delinquencies; designated State Prosecutors for children; a designated unit of probation and correctional officers; a juvenile diversion programme; rehabilitation programme; residential facilities and correctional centres. Although the law does not include special provisions for girls, it does ensure that children are not punitively punished and their rights are protected. While a total of 205 cases of children who come into conflict with the law have been reported and attended to by the Ministry of Social and Family Development over the past five years, 64% of these cases pertain to male children. However, the gender distribution of such cases has fluctuated every year during the reporting period, from 33% in 2019 to 41% in 2023. Although the total number of cases reported have been gradually decreasing over the reporting period, with the lowest number of cases reported in 2023, this is also the year in which the proportion of cases of girls who come into conflict with the law have been the highest in the five-year period. This indicates that focus should be on identifying girls who are vulnerable or susceptible to fall into conflict with the law and provide them adequate support.

As detailed elsewhere in this report, the enactment of the Education Act created pathways to strengthen girls' access to quality education and skills development. The Education Act mandates the state to provide education for children under the age of 18, with education being compulsory until the age of 16 or completion of grade 10. Through this provision, the state is therefore mandated to ensure that children in confinement, in conflict with the law, and children who are pregnant or teen mothers are also able to access education. This thus ensures that girl children, who may otherwise have been deprived of education due to circumstances surrounding pregnancy or motherhood which prevent them from attending schools, are also able to continue and complete education.

The past five years has thus seen substantial steps to protect and promote the rights of children, including the girl child.

**31. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to integrate gender perspectives and concerns into environmental policies, including climate change adaptation and mitigation, biodiversity conservation and land degradation?**

The geographical nature of Maldives and its low-lying status leaves it immensely vulnerable to environmental degradation and climate change effects. Environmental degradation and climate change disproportionately affect women. As mentioned elsewhere in this report, women make up the majority of the population in the islands, where climate change effects and weather incidents such as flooding typically occur. Additionally, with a great number of women working in the informal sector and particularly work that relies on natural resources, such as rope and mat-weaving and food production and processing, environmental degradation with affect natural resources severely disrupt women's livelihoods. Even within the urban context, women's role as primary caretakers mean that they interact with environmental factors, including water usage and waste management, different to men. It is therefore important that gender perspectives are integrated into environmental policies, with women being represented in policy-making, planning, implementations and monitoring.

Over the review period, women have played an instrumental role in governance and leadership roles related to the environment and natural resources. The ministerial portfolio for environment was held by a woman from May 2021 until November 2023. Additionally, women are now expected to have a greater role in natural resource management and governance at a local level, following the 33% quota allocated to local councils. Given the role of local governments in mapping out development and land use plans within their jurisdiction, it is councils who make decisions on how a majority of natural resources are managed, and an increase in representation of women in local councils is expected to translate into greater participation of women in this governance process. However, as the assessment conducted by LGA on women's participation in local councils indicates that there are still some challenges in ensuring women's meaningful participation in issues that pertain to the development of the islands, including land use and natural resource management. While these concerns were also echoed by stakeholders such as non-governmental organisations, the assessment also indicates a generally positive shift in women's participation in local governance, and a perception amongst a majority of female councillors that they were able to meaningfully contribute to such issues.

There has also been concerted efforts to mainstream gender in projects related to environment. The Ministry of Climate Change, Environment and Energy incorporated a gender perspective in a majority of their projects, including the development of a Gender Action Plan and impact assessments, as well as consultation with the NWM throughout project design and implementation. Throughout these projects, measures are undertaken to ensure women's meaningful participation in consultation and in implementation, including scheduling consultations in the evening to encourage wider participation of women, who often have to tend to domestic and care responsibilities during the day. Additionally, these projects significantly utilise and mobilise WDCs, including providing them with trainings to carry out activities at island level. At every level of project planning, implementation, and monitoring,

gender is integrated to ensure that women meaningfully participate in processes related to their environment.

**32. In the past five years, what actions has your country taken to integrate gender perspectives into policies and programmes for disaster risk reduction and building environmental and climate resilience?**

With increasing incidents of natural disasters such as flooding and other climate change-induced incidents observed in the past five years, there is a growing need to develop strong frameworks and policies on disaster risk reduction and climate resilience, which are equitable and integrate gender perspectives. As mentioned throughout this report, the resident population outside Male' or in the atolls consist mainly of women, children, the elderly and migrant workers, all of whom are subject to different types of vulnerability.

The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) is the main coordinating body for disaster management at the national level, and carries out their work under “a holistic model, wherein the processes of hazard identification and mitigation, community preparedness, integrated response efforts, and recovery are planned for and undertaken contiguously within a risk management context to address issues of vulnerability”. This work is guided by the National Community-based Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, which includes stipulations to ensure women’s participation in DRR. The CBDRM framework outlines that 40% of participants for Island Disaster Management Planning (IMDP) should be women, which has been practiced in all the islands where IMDP has been carried out and completed thus far. This program is further expected to be expanded in a manner which strengthens women’s voice for local resilience.

Additionally, women’s participation in Community Emergency Response Teams (CERTs) is ensured, via inclusion of women in trainings conducted. At present, there are fully-functional CERTs in 8 islands, with 30% of trained CERT members being women.

Under the Maldives Urban Development and Resilience Project, NDMA is also formulating a gender equitable guideline on emergency preparedness and response. The guideline aims to encourage women’s participation and leadership in disaster preparedness and response, track, manage and utilise sex-disaggregated data for disaster risk management, and incorporate gender-responsive programming across the DRM cycle. This includes integration of a gender perspective in risk assessment, risk reduction, preparedness, financial protection, and post-disaster recovery and response, including addressing increased risk of GBV and provision of SRH services post-disaster.

The development of a national Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) strategy is also currently underway, which will include a component on gender mainstreaming in DRR. The NDMA is also working on the development/revision of the National Emergency Operation Procedure (NEOP) which will have a separate emergency function on Protection, Gender and Inclusion. These instruments are further expected to address gendered concerns within the DRM context, including protection from GBV in crises and SRH services.

NDMA also ensures that the Minimum Initial Service package and hygiene kits are provided to women during emergency responses and has a Relief Guideline which outlines providing specific and requires care and support disaster victims.

#### **Section Four: National institutions and processes**

### **33. Please describe your country's national strategy or action plan for gender equality, including its name, the period it covers, its priority, funding and alignment with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including the targets under SDG 5.**

The National Gender Policy, which is mandated to be formulated under Section 42 of the Gender Equality Act (Law No. 18/2016), was endorsed in September 2019. The policy does not have a specific term or period of coverage, but the Gender Equality Act mandates the formulation and introduction of an action plan to carry out the strategies outlined in the National Gender Policy. The GEAP was subsequently developed and rolled out in 2022, with a five-year implementation period from 2022 to 2026. The GEAP is in alignment with the 5 policy goals set out in the NGP, which are detailed below.

Policy Goal 1 of the GEAP focuses on leadership and government. This goal includes outcome indicators such as increased representation of women in the Parliament, local government, judiciary, and senior or managerial positions. An additional outcome under this Policy Goal is an improvement in the Global Gender Gap index score. The most substantial target under this goal is increasing women's representation at the parliament, with a target of 33% women as MPs by 2026.

Policy Goal 2 focuses on economic empowerment, with outcome indicators targeting towards increased LFPR amongst women, reduced unemployment rates, reduction of women who are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET), reducing the proportion of women in informal employment, more equal distribution of time spent on unpaid household work, and increasing the proportion of women with land ownership.

Policy Goal 3 is focused on institutional gender mainstreaming, which aims to strengthen Maldivian society with improved systems within government institutions to understand and address the specific needs of women and men and girls and boys. This goal includes outcome indicators such as number of public/private entities which have established complaints mechanisms per the minimum standards under the GEA, number of institutions implementing GRB, proportion of national gender-specific statistics produced, and number of gender focal points or MGEM advocates appointed who have gender-related tasks incorporated into their job descriptions.

Policy Goal 4 focuses on elimination of gender-based violence, with activities that primarily relate to promotion of SRH and expansion of support for GBV victims. Outcome indicators for this goal include increased proportion of women with family planning needs met, as well as the means to make informed decisions about their own sexual and reproductive health, decrease in women who undergo intimate partner violence, decrease in FGM amongst women aged 15 to 49 and elimination of FGM for girls aged 14 and under.

Policy Goal 5 focuses on access to justice, with outcome indicators including the number of female judges and magistrates, the proportion of GBV/DV cases which are sent for prosecution, and the proportion of GBV/DV clients who receive legal aid.

Across the GEAP, outcome and output indicators have been aligned with SDG indicators, and contribute broadly to the attainment of SDGs, even beyond SDG 5 (Gender Equality). The

GEAP directly contributes to 8 of the 9 targets under SDG 5, with the exception of Target 5.b on enhancing the use of enabling technology to promote the empowerment of women. However, it is expected that the implementation of the GEAP, and the increasing need for digitalisation, will allow for greater mobilisation of technology to further gender equality outcomes and women empowerment.

The GEAP is fairly comprehensive in its coverage of marginalised groups, and includes several actions which target vulnerable or marginalised groups including youth, women with disabilities and migrant workers. There is particular focus on economically empowering women with disabilities and vulnerable youth, and in ensuring equitable access to SRH for vulnerable and at-risk groups, including youth, PWDs, migrant workers and substance users.

The GEAP is currently at the mid-term stage, with a review of implementation pending this year. While substantial progress has been achieved across all 5 policy goals, significant challenges have also been identified in implementation. These challenges are primarily the result of limited resources, both financial and human, to carry out the broad range of activities outlined in the GEAP. While the NWM is responsible for implementing approximately 30% of actions outlined in the GEAP, there are a myriad of other stakeholders including line ministries and statutory bodies, who are also outlined as implementing agencies, including lead agencies. Although a costing exercise for the GEAP was conducted in 2022, this exercise did not cover the full implementation period and lack of information received from implementing agency resulted in an incomplete costing of the GEAP. Consequently, it is difficult to ascertain the exact budget required for the full implementation of the GEAP and identify to what extent resources have been allocated. Implementation of key activities carried out under GEAP, particularly those led by the NWM, have been conducted via support provided by donor agencies and development partners such as UNDP. At present, a majority of the activities that have been carried out were not funded within the state budget.

Additionally, there have been substantial challenges in effectively monitoring the GEAP. This includes a lack of technical capacity within the NWM, lack of support and coordination from other implementing agencies, a lack of functionality of the existing monitoring mechanisms such as the Technical Committees (detailed in a previous section of this report). Work is underway to develop a more robust monitoring framework, including revisions to the governance structure of the GEAP and a more functional results framework. These challenges will also be further addressed during the mid-term review of the GEAP. A comprehensive review of the GEAP is expected to be conducted in 2024, following the development of the new government's SAP, which the GEAP will need to be aligned with.

**34. Please describe your country's system for tracking the proportion of the national budget that is invested in the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women (gender-responsive budgeting), including the approximate proportion of the national budget that is invested in this area.**

At present, there is no existing cohesive mechanism to track the proportion of national budget that is allocated for, or invested in gender equality or empowerment of women. The only measure currently available is the budgetary figure allocated for the national women's machinery, located within the Ministry of Social and Family Development; the Family Protection Authority, which is the monitoring body for domestic violence issues in the Maldives; and the Women's Development Committees (WDCs), which are allocated 5% of the budget allocated to their corresponding local council.

Although Maldives has not adopted a gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) model yet, there have been numerous attempts over the past few years to integrate GRB. The Ministry of Finance has introduced some initial steps towards GRB as part of the broader budget reform process by requiring New Policy Initiatives (NPI) to include a gender perspective and narrative on how the proposal will impact gender equality and the inclusion of other vulnerable populations. While this marks an important entry-point towards adopting GRB, the capacity to lead GRB is limited within the Ministry of Finance, and there is limited understanding among planning and budget officers across the government on the relationship between gender and sector plans and how to make a case for new policy initiatives against gender equality objectives. Additionally, the gender requirements for NPI proposals are minimal, which means that these are not considered as priority areas when developing proposals. However, a more fleshed out model of GRB is expected to be rolled out under ADB's Strengthening Gender Inclusive Initiatives (SGII) in the coming months, with two ministries being included in the pilot phase of the project.

There is also potential to measure gender equality outcomes via performance indicators, through the changes being made to the current budgeting system. The government is shifting towards performance-based budgeting, whereas the current system is programme-based. Although the programme-based budgeting structure does offer a start to identifying resource allocations which go towards empowering women and gender equality, the introduction of performance-based budgeting will allow for greater measurement of gender equality outcomes. At present, preparation to introduce performance-based budgeting is underway, with Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) being identified across the government.

The government has also introduced SDG budget tagging, with the support of UNDP Maldives; SDG budget tagging has been completed for this period, with plans to extend budget tagging backwards over time. This will allow for stock-taking of resource allocation over the years for particular sectors and sustainable development goal outcomes, including gender equality.

Although gender-responsive budgeting has not been fully launched or integrated into the Maldivian governance system, there are promising steps that have been undertaken which allow for identification of the proportion of the national budget used to generate gender equality outcomes. Incorporation of gender perspective and gender-responsive budgeting remains a priority of the government, which will continue to be implemented over the next five years.





**35. What formal mechanisms are in place for different stakeholders to participate in the implementation and monitoring of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?**

The Maldives does not currently have a specific mechanism established for the implementation and monitoring of the Beijing Platform for Action. The national women's machinery, located within the Ministry of Social and Family Development, presently is mandated to lead the implementation of the BPfA, and the monitoring process. In its work plan, the broader national action plan (GEAP), and other work carried out under its mandate, the NWM incorporates several actions which contribute to the implementation of the BPfA, CEDAW recommendations, as well as attainment of the SDGs. The GEAP, for example, has key outcome indicators outlined within the policy goals which are in alignment with outcome indicators for SDGs, particularly SDG 5.

The existing monitoring mechanisms for the GEAP includes engagement with government agencies, who are assigned and implementing agencies, as well as civil society organisations and women's rights organisations, academia, as well as UN agencies. In its everyday work, the NWM continually consults with CSOs and women's rights organisations, and seeks the support of UN agencies. This includes support during development of legislative and policy instruments, such as amendments to laws pertaining to gender equality, new initiatives, as well as targeted programmes and events.

The Maldives does have a specific mechanism for implementation and monitoring of SDGs, the National Planning Division, located within the Ministry of Housing, Land and Urban Development (formerly the Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure). As part of the SDG coordination, the Maldives has carried out two voluntary national reviews (VNR) thus far, with the second VNR being conducted in 2023.

**36. Please describe how stakeholders have contributed to the preparation of the present national report.**

Following the initiation of the national review by the national gender machinery placed within the Ministry of Social and Family Development, coordination efforts with different stakeholders including government ministries, state bodies, and non-governmental organisations were carried out. At its initial stage, the Ministry mobilised gender focal points within the state apparatus via the MGEM advocates in line ministries and other government agencies to brief them on the review process. Following this, a number of stakeholder consultation meetings were carried out with government agencies, including line ministries.

Parallely, consultation meetings were carried out with non-government organisations as well as workers' associations and trade unions, to ensure that the review process is representative and not limited to the perception of state parties.

A significant challenge present during the review process was the limited timeframe for the review. Following the change in the administration of the government in November 2023, substantial changes were made to personnel and the mandates of line ministries. During this process, there were challenges in inter-agency coordination which delayed the initiation of the review process. The review period also coincided with the development of the Strategic Action Plan, which presented additional constraints for scheduling consultations and information collection.

Despite the numerous challenges faced, stakeholders contributed a wealth of information that have not only shaped the narrative of the review report but also established entry points for further analysis to be carried out by the NWM going forward. The list of stakeholders who have contributed to the review process are appended to this review report. In addition to those that were consulted (either via writing or through meetings), the report was built on a number of published reports and information made available by several other stakeholders.

**37. Please describe your country’s action plan and timeline for implementation of the recommendations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (if a State party), or of the recommendations of the Universal Periodic Review or other United Nations human rights mechanisms that address gender inequality/discrimination against women.**

The Maldives National Mechanism for Reporting and Follow-up (NMRF) was established on 5 November 2020, by President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih. Initially, the focus was on setting up a mechanism for ‘reporting’ and ‘follow-up’ on international human rights obligations, based on guidance from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), However, based on subsequent experiences and recommendations from OHCHR, the NMRF was restructured on 30 October 2022, and renamed as ‘National Mechanism for Implementation, Reporting and Follow-up’ institutionalizing the crucial ‘implementation’ function.

The current structure of the NMIRF is organized into three tiers. Tier 1, the NMIRF Steering Committee, includes the President’s Office, the Attorney General’s Office, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and is responsible for making final policy decisions and handling sensitive matters. Tier 2, the NMIRF Committee, consists of technical representatives from various ministries and state institutions, overseeing general NMIRF activities, formulating work plans, and managing the National Recommendations Tracking Database (NRTD). This committee also handles reporting, follow-up, and implementation work of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Tier 3 comprises treaty-based subcommittees with policy and technical level representatives from relevant ministries and institutions, responsible for reporting, follow-up, and implementation work under specific treaties.

Since its inception, the NMRF has been dedicated to fulfilling the international human rights reporting obligations of the Maldives. The NMRF has undertaken several major tasks, including accepting recommendations from the third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), carried out in November 2020, submitting the 6th-7th Periodic Report under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), participating in the review session of the 6th Periodic Report under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in October 2021, and beginning biannual implementation tracking of the recommendations.

Additionally, the NMRF has submitted the 2nd Periodic Report under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the 13th-15th Periodic Report under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), and Replies to the List of Issues related to the Initial Report under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). They have also submitted Interim Replies in response to the Concluding Observations (CEDAW/c/MDV/CO/6) issued under CEDAW, and have been working on adopting the National Recommendations Tracking Database (NRTD), which aims to streamline and ensure timely monitoring and follow-up on the implementation of recommendations.

## **Section Five: Data and statistics**

### **38. What are the most important areas in which your country has made most progress over the past five years when it comes to gender statistics at the national level?**

The past five years has seen immense progress made, with regard to the production, use and promotion of gender statistics at a national level. In 2019, an assessment on gender statistics was conducted, which identified that only half of the gender indicators requested under global frameworks adopted by the Maldives were available. Additionally, this assessment identified that significant data gaps existed in land ownership, sexual violence, environment and other qualitative indicators. The assessment also found that the available data was often not produced in a timely manner to fully capture the situation of women.

Following this assessment, a number of legal and policy instruments were introduced, which greatly strengthened the national statistical system. The national Statistics Act (Law No. 16/2021) was enacted in 2021, which formally established the Maldives Bureau of Statistics (MBS). With the enactment of the law, there were structural changes brought to the national statistical system of the Maldives, including the assignment of a special unit within the MBS, with particular focus on gender.

The prioritisation of gender statistics is also evident in the gender-responsive approach embedded in the National Strategy for Development of Statistics (NSDS). Gender is recognised as a cross-cutting aspect, with gender data being integrated into all stages and sectors in the development of official statistics. The NSDS further proposed a list of gender indicators to be prioritised in the Maldives, and calls for a dedicated gender statistics budget to be incorporated into the overall budget for statistical programmes. In alignment with the NSDS, MBS has also exerted efforts over the past five years to re-constitute an inter-agency working group on gender statistics. At present, this committee has been established, with MBS and MoSFD co-leading the working group, although it is not operationalised.

Over the past five years, MBS has conducted two major surveys which have generated critical gender statistics: the 2022 census and the 2019 HIES provide important data on population dynamics, including gender differences in education, employment, and income. MBS continues to publish knowledge products based on data availed from these surveys, with statistical releases published in conjunction with occasions such as International Women's Day. These statistics are especially useful for the work of the NWM in formulation of policies and programmes, and in its advocacy work, including sensitisation sessions.

With one of the most significant challenges in generating useful gender statistics in the Maldives being the lack of administrative data or lack of gender disaggregation in existent administrative data, there have been efforts undertaken in the past five years to improve gender statistics generated at administrative level. MBS has taken measures to increase data literacy, including trainings for data users and producers in September 2019 and incorporation of gender sensitisation into trainings for census administrators in 2022, to highlight the importance of a gender perspective in generating data.

### **39. Over the next five years, what are your country’s priorities for strengthening national gender statistics?**

Over the next five years, the Maldives has several priorities for the strengthening of national gender statistics. One major focus is the development of the National Strategy for Development of Gender Statistics (NSDGS), currently underway, led by the Maldives Bureau of Statistics (MBS) in partnership with the NWM and Paris21. This will be informed by the country study on the ‘The Role of Gender Data in Policy Making in the Maldives’ conducted in 2023 under this partnership.

These efforts will be implemented together with the Output 1 of the Strengthening Gender Inclusive Initiatives in Maldives (SGII) Project supported by ADB, aimed towards addressing critical GESI data gaps in the national statistical system. Under this output, a consultant firm is to be hired, that will support MBS along with other producers of official statistics in the Maldives Statistical System (MSS), Interagency Working Group on Gender Statistics (IWG-GS) and the National Statistics Coordinating Committee (NSCC), in shaping a “data for policy” agenda, prioritizing data and indicator frameworks catering policies on gender, children, elderly, and persons with disabilities in the sectors identified by the government for piloting GRB (gender, education, and tourism), as well as monitoring GEAP, NSDS and NSDGS.

As mentioned earlier in this report, even though the IAWG-GS has already been established, this group has not been fully operationalised, and there have not been any significant activities conducted by the group yet. The consultant firm will be engaged in strengthening the IAWG-GS to ensure effective coordination and collaboration among various stakeholders in the collection, analysis, and dissemination of gender statistics.

This project places a strong emphasis on enhancing the capabilities of both data producers and users through comprehensive training programs. These trainings will cover a range of topics such as gender statistics with a focus on DV/GBV and unpaid work, integrating data for GESI statistics from various sources, data collection and statistical production methodologies, ensuring quality through administrative data checks, methodologies for SDG indicators, and utilizing gender statistics for evidence-based policy analysis.

Trainings will also be conducted for civil society organizations (CSOs) on the use of gender statistics for policy advocacy and monitoring. MBS staff will receive software and training on statistical data processing and visualization to enhance data production capacities.

Additionally, facilitating user-producer dialogues to address priorities for improving gender statistics through workshops, technical analysis, and the development of statistical dialogue briefs to inform all stakeholders will also be a key focus in the next few years

Several knowledge products will be developed under the SGII Project such the DV/GBV prevalence survey conducted by FPA, re-processing data from the 2022 Census to publish gender-specific reports and analyses, a GESI Statistics Communication Strategy for pilot sectors of GRB, status and analyses reports. These publications are expected to provide new or more disaggregated statistics which will shape policymaking in the coming years.

Additionally, there are currently plans in place to conduct a Labour Force Survey in the Maldives. Although initially planned to be conducted in 2024, challenges in securing sufficient funds have setback the timeline for this survey. MBS is currently working towards securing funds to carry out the survey. Given the significance of labour force data in identifying disparities between men and women in the economy, and economic opportunities being one of the areas in which gender gaps persist in the Maldives, the data generated from the survey will prove instrumental for policymaking in gender issues. MBS is working on the incorporation of a time use survey within this survey. Additionally, as a key priority for the coming years, MBS also is working towards re-convening the National Transfer Accounts (NTA), through which time-use surveys and valuation exercises can be conducted.

#### **40. What gender-specific indicators has your country prioritized for monitoring progress on the SDGs?**

The Maldives has not identified a national set of indicators for monitoring progress on the SDGs, as SDG indicators have not been localised.

However, the NSDS has a proposed list of gender indicators, including indicators proposed to be included in the priority list of indicators, SDG gender indicators which are missing from sector proposed indicators, mi.

A total of 235 indicators have been identified in this proposed list. Data is available for majority of these indicators and is maintained at administrative level, but a number of indicators do not have any data available at present.

#### **41. Which data disaggregations are routinely provided by major surveys in your country?**

The Maldives has collected data disaggregated by geographic location, income, sex, education, marital status, migratory status, and disability in major surveys. During the past five years, Maldives has conducted two major surveys – the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) in 2019 and the Population and Housing Census in 2022. A majority of the data collected by MBS is sex-disaggregated, with gender statistics being identified as a significant priority for the Maldives.

The 2022 census included data disaggregated by geographical location, sex, education, marital status, migratory status, nationality, and disability. This survey collected information on disability, for the first time, using the WG Short Set on Functioning.

The 2019 HIES included data disaggregated by geographical location, nationality, sex, education, and income, and marital status.

For the Maldives, important distinctions are made between populations in Male' and in the atolls, which is consistently disaggregated in all major surveys conducted. As observed throughout the report, services available in the atolls are vastly different from Male', the capital of the country where many of the services including tertiary level healthcare, a majority of civil service jobs, and educational facilities are located. In addition to disaggregation by the specific geographic location, such as the island or atoll, populations living outside Male' are often grouped together and contrasted with the Male' population, for this purpose.



## **Section Six: Conclusion and next steps**

The review on the implementation of the BPfA over the past five years has illustrated a great deal of progress made in the achievement of gender equality and empowerment of women and girls in the Maldives. This includes seminal legislative amendments, in areas such as women's leadership and in addressing GBV. The review also highlights good policies and practices that were introduced during or immediately following COVID-19, which have in turn been sustained and further developed to close gender gaps. While this review aims to provide as comprehensive a picture of the progress made and challenges endorsed over the past five years, it must be noted that expansive measures taken across various sectors in the past five years have contributed to women empowerment and gender equality, which cannot be sufficiently detailed or contextualised within a report of this scope.

At the same time, there was a lack of available information for some areas and themes, due to a general lack of data or lack of gender-disaggregated data. Another key observation from the review process was that there still appears to be a general lack of understanding of gender, and the importance of a gender perspective in different areas of work. This presented a challenge in getting the most relevant information from stakeholders. Greater efforts need to be exerted to instil the importance of gender mainstreaming.

The biggest challenge during this review process was the limited timeframe within which information was collected, compiled and the report finalised. These challenges were further compounded by the very limited resources in the national women's machinery, which led the review process. The short timeframe for the review meant that consultations were often grouped together, which inhibits more in-depth consultations, and that a more participatory process, with a validation of the report, did not occur. In addition to lack of human resources, there were no robust mechanisms within the NWM in place to readily carry out a stock-taking activity of this type. Budgetary and time constraints also meant that the review process could not be conducted via an external independent party. In moving forward with the implementation of the BPfA, and monitoring and review processes to come, priority needs to be assigned to ensuring routine and timely data on relevant indicators and themes under the BPfA are collected and maintained. A focused mechanism in place to monitor the BPfA and related commitments would further ensure greater planning of the review process.

The review process also highlighted a consistent challenge across sectors for all stakeholders, which is the lack of resources, particularly budgetary support, needed to fully carry out gender mainstreaming tasks. Even in cases where implementing agencies assign priority to gender equality initiatives and incorporate these activities into their work plans, a lack of budget has caused significant gaps in implementation. As highlighted in this report, the government has made gender-responsive budgeting a priority for the coming years and it is expected that with GRB mechanisms in place, these challenges will be addressed, and the implementation of the BPfA will be accelerated.

Despite the numerous and significant challenges faced during the review process, the report includes a wealth of information which captures the general progressive trend in terms of gender equality and women empowerment in the Maldives. The contribution of key stakeholders, including Ministries, state agencies, NGOs and other external parties has been

invaluable. It is of note that the review was primarily conducted during an especially busy time for the government, with the development of the current administration's Strategic Action Plan underway. It cannot therefore be understated the importance of the contribution and commitment of those stakeholders who were consulted as part of this review.

## **Annex 1**

### *List of stakeholders consulted*

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Method of consultation/information collection</b>
Maldives Police Service	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Prosecutor General's Office	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Family Protection Authority	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Human Rights Commission of the Maldives	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Anti-Trafficking in Persons Office	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Ministry of Education	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Ministry of Economic Development and Trade	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Maldives Pension Administration Office	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Business Center Corporation	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
SME Development Finance Corporation	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Ministry of Higher Education, Labour and Skills Development	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Ministry of Health	Stakeholder consultation meeting held in person
Ministry of Climate Change, Environment and Energy	Information received in writing
National Social Protection Agency	Information received in writing
National Disaster Management Authority	Information received in writing
Ministry of Finance	Information received in writing
Maldives National Defence Force	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
National Counter Terrorism Centre	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Maldives Bureau of Statistics	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Department of Judicial Administration	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Judicial Service Commission	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Maldives Media Council	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Maldives Broadcasting Commission	Stakeholder consultation meeting held in person
Hope for Women	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Women and Democracy	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Transparency Maldives	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Family Legal Clinic	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Society for Health Education	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Public Interest Law Centre	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Maldives Trade Union Congress	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
National Centre for Information Technology	Information received in writing
Civil Service Commission	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online
Attorney General's Office	Stakeholder consultation meeting held online