

Women's participation in Politics

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Introduction to Hope for Women

Hope for Women is a non-governmental organization in the Maldives working towards ending all forms of violence against women and girls, while also promoting gender equality and women's participation in public life.

Introduction to the paper

Every country is unique with different circumstances depending on the nature of its socio-cultural, political and religious context. In the Maldives, on a broader lens, there are no structural barriers denying women equal rights. In some fields such as education, gender parity has been achieved. However, emerging issues such as the rising conservative religious ideologies and increasing dominance of patriarchy are threatening to reverse the gains women have made over the years.

Even after decades of advocacy for gender equality, there are very few women in policy making, both in the public and private sectors. Present-day society in the Maldives is, by and large, dominated by males, particularly in senior government positions, parliament and in the judiciary. There are challenges at the policy level as well as at the grassroots level to increase women's participation in politics and to mobilize women advocates for the same purpose.

In that regard, this paper will look into the current challenges in the Maldives with regard to women's participation in politics. Focus of the discussions will be given to analyze strengths and weaknesses at the policy level, the attitude towards women and other socio-cultural and religious challenges.

Current situation and challenges

Statistics¹:

	Males	Females
Courts (Judges and Magistrates)	174	5
Ambassadors and High Commissioners	7	3

¹ Retrieved from <http://www.presidencymaldives.gov.mv/>, <http://lga.gov.mv/>, <http://www.majlis.gov.mv/> and <http://jsc.gov.mv/> on 4 December 2016

Cabinet	14	3
At Ministerial Rank	5	1
State Ministers	33	3
Deputy Ministers	78	15

	Total	Female	Percentage of women
Local Councils	1096	62	5.6%

	Total	Female	Percentage of women
People's Majilis (2014)	85	5	5.8%
Parliament Members (2009)	77	5	6.4%
Parliament Members (2005)	50	6	12%
Parliament Members (2000)	50	5 upto 11/10/2004 6 from 12/10/2004 – 27/02/2005	10% and 12% respectively

The 2008 Constitution of Maldives includes a comprehensive chapter on fundamental rights and freedoms. Notable among these includes the right to non-discrimination, equality and the right to vote and run for public office², which removed the gender bar that existed in the previous Constitution of 1998³.

The Gender Equality Law passed in August 2016 has special provisions for increasing women's representation in high level political positions. The Law prohibits any form of discrimination based on gender and encourages temporary special measures to promote equality of women's representation in public office⁴. Although enacting of a gender equality law is an achievement, its provision to increase women's participation and representation in politics could have been made much stronger if affirmative action such as temporary quotas in numerical terms were included. Furthermore, most of the responsibility, which regard to achieving gender equality have been assigned to the Ministry of Gender and Family.

² The Constitution of the Republic of Maldives 2008

³ The Constitution of the Republic of Maldives 1998

⁴ Act no 18/2016, The Gender Equality Act

However, the effectiveness impact and result of those responsibilities could have been better, had it been assigned to state institutions such as the Election's Commission and/or political parties who would have greater power and influence over matters related to affirmative action.

Soon after the Gender Equality Bill was first accepted by the parliament and handed over to the social committee for its review, several civil society advocates submitted their suggestions and recommendations for the bill. All suggestions and recommendations submitted by the civil society included an element for including 'Temporary Special Measures' to increase women's representation at high level political positions, specifically at the People's Majilis. However, the final draft of the bill submitted to the Majilis floor by the social committee included only a limited number of the total recommendations and none of it included any concrete provisions for temporary special measures. Following that, just before the bill was passed by the parliament, amendments for including a quota system to increase women's participation in politics were proposed by MP Faris Maumoon. However it was voted down by a majority of 41 members.

Apart from the Gender Equality Law, the National Gender Policy 2016 – 2021 also includes provisions for increasing women's participation and representation in political positions. Specific outputs and actions such as 'enabling political parties to put in place mechanisms to increase the representation of women at organizational management levels and as candidates, including temporary special measures' were included to increase women's participation in Leadership and Governance⁵:

Although the policy is a sign of positive change and reinforces the State's efforts to achieve the same, the level of implementation of the policy and the impact it has over political parties and related institutions would be limited, especially given the limited roles assigned to them in this regard through laws.

Maldives ratified the Convention for Eliminating all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993 with reservations on Article 7(a) and a blanket reservation on Article 16. However, following the adoption of the 2008 constitution, Maldives withdrew its reservation on Article 7 in March 2010, as the new constitution of Maldives does not prohibit a woman holding the position of Head of State.

⁵ Maldives National Gender Policy

There are several articles in CEDAW, which specifically aim to address the issue of increasing women's political participation and equal representation⁶. Some of those are articles include article 4 on affirmative action, Article 7 on the right of women to vote, to participate in forming and implementing government policies and to join public and political organizations and Article 8 on the right of women to represent the country at international level.

The last CEDAW review of Maldives was held in March 2015, during the 60th Session of the CEDAW Committee. In light of the State's report and information provided by other civil society actors, the following concluding observation and recommendations were issued with regard to the level of women's political participation in Maldives⁷:

"The Committee is concerned that legislative initiatives submitted to the parliament on the introduction of quotas for parliamentary and council elections have repeatedly been rejected. It also notes with concern the absence of temporary special measures as a systematic component to accelerate substantive equality between women and men in all areas of the Convention, the ongoing legal reform notwithstanding.

The Committee recommends that the State party:

(a) Intensify its efforts to raise the awareness of political parties regarding the nature and scope of temporary special measures with a view to familiarizing them with the concept;

(b) Include a legislative basis for the adoption of temporary special measures in the gender equality bill and implement those measures in various forms, such as outreach and support programmes, quotas and other proactive and results-oriented measures aimed at achieving substantive equality between women and men in all areas, especially in economic, political and public life, in which women are underrepresented, and use those measures to address the disadvantages and inequalities faced by women outside Male' and in remote islands, migrant women, women with disabilities and women heads of household."

Although CEDAW is an effective international instrument to ensure advancement of women's rights, country level implementation of the convention in Maldives is limited, for various reasons, and hence, hinders its

⁶ The Convention for Eliminating all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

⁷ Concluding observations on the combined fourth and fifth periodic reports of Maldives, 2015

effectiveness. Hope for Women, as highlighted in its 'NGO Shadow report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, 2012', for the 60th session of the CEDAW Committee, observes that the 'National Women's Machinery' (NWM) has been facing challenges in getting other State institutions to accept the Convention and uphold State obligations to CEDAW and it remains relevant even today⁸. Furthermore, the NWM that must take a lead role to implement CEDAW has been traditionally weak, under-resourced and inadequately supported, arguably due to inadequate political will to promote and support the advancement of women, as well as political resistance at all levels to limit active and meaningful participation of women in national development, specifically in the political sphere.

It is important to highlight the commitment given by the Government of Maldives as a voluntary pledge before the election to the UN Human Rights Council, submitted to the UN General Assembly by the permanent mission of Maldives on 28th August 2013, stating that, "Secure and fully deliver the rights enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women" [part (e) of paragraph 10] under the subheading Continuing commitment to human rights.

Furthermore, the level of commitment of political parties to increase women representing in leadership positions are inadequate. Out of the 6 political parties registered in Maldives, only 1 party has slots reserved for women at the council level. No party has slots reserved for women for the parliament or atoll/city/island councils.

In Addition, instead of senior management of parties advocating for special measures to increase women's representation at senior levels, it is often observed that a bottom up approach is used, in which women of lower ranks are expected to advocate for those rights in order for it to be considered by senior executives. Similarly, no special arrangements are made by parties to provide financial and other resources for women who are unable to adequately finance their election campaigns. Given the costly nature of such campaigns, women, once again, are at a greater disadvantage due to non-availability of avenues for campaign financing.

Prior to 2008, and after the creation of political parties, women representatives of political parties were engaged in the party talks held to expedite the passing of the 2008 constitution. Contrary to that, no women were seen in the all party talks held since.

⁸ Maldives NGO Shadow Report to the CEDAW Committee, 2012

Aside from the policy level aspect of the issue, women face numerous socio-cultural and religious challenges for political participation. It is observed that in the Maldives, the amount of time women can commit to their public life is very limited because of the heavy responsibilities of housework and childcare. Husbands and fathers do not look upon household chores and childcare as a shared responsibility and hence overburdens women. Although significant efforts have been put into sensitizing people on gender equality, not much difference on the matter has been observed over the past years. In fact, the women's situation in Maldives seems to be regressing.

The Human Rights Commission of the Maldives (HRCM) produced its first baseline study on knowledge, behavior and attitudes towards human rights in the Maldives in 2005, followed by a second replication of the same survey in 2011. Comparing the findings of the two studies, the HRCM observed the trend that among men, the belief about equality of rights in family matters had dropped from nearly 85% in 2005 to 67% in 2011⁹. The change for the same figure among women, is 85.9% in 2005 to 80.7% in 2011. In the same report, the number of men supporting the right of women to take part in politics and governance dropped from nearly 73% in 2005 to less than 58% in 2011¹⁰.

According to 'An Assessment on perceptions about women's participation in public life in the Maldives', by the International Federation for Electoral Systems (IFES), *'in all communities consulted, it was evident that the perceived primary role of women is as parent and mother with the responsibility to care for children, the household and family. All other activities are viewed as secondary, which are further compounded by the socio-cultural, socio-economic and sociopolitical context of the community.'*¹¹

In 2014, Hope For Women conducted a text book review to assess the existence of gender-stereotyping. It was evident from the findings of that review that stereotypical roles are reinforced and instilled in students through the education system¹². In addition to this, emerging conservative religious ideologies and its preaching further reinforces the lifestyle in which the women's place is only at home. Moreover, the absence of affordable day care facilities limits alternative options available for mothers, especially for single mothers and those living in nuclear families.

⁹ The "Rights" Side of Life: Second Baseline Human Rights Survey, by the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives

¹⁰ The "Rights" Side of Life: A Baseline Human Rights Survey, by the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives

¹¹ Qualitative assessment: Perceptions about women's participation in public life in the Maldives, by the International Federation for Electoral Systems

¹² The roles of males and females in textbooks, by Hope For Women

During a project initiated by Hope For Women in 2014, a series of trainings were held with elected female councilors, members of Women's Development Committees and other interested women across Maldives, to educate and empower them to participate in politics. For each target atoll, an invitation was sent to the all Island Councils or WDC of that atoll to nominate women who may be interested in participating in the training. The training was held in one island of the atoll and women in other islands were invited travel to those islands, for which Hope For Women undertook all expenses. Unfortunately, mobilizing women for the trainings were a huge challenge. Even with all expenses covered, women were unable to travel to participate in the 2-3 day training mostly because of their household and childcare responsibilities. It was also observed that women had little interest to participate in such trainings, citing various reasons, and it was not given enough priority in most atolls.

The attitudes towards women in general also acts as a factor that discourages women's participation in politics. Degrading and sexist comments and remarks towards women in general, and towards politically active women, are made by some men in social media and in some incidences, even at the parliament. Women were called 'black crows' by a male member of the parliament, during a debate at the parliament. In a tweet by a prominent politician in the Maldives, 'women' were called out as a part of the '3 W's' (Wine, Women & Wealth' that 'make good people bad'. A female member of the parliament was spit on during a heated debate, during a parliament session. In all these cases, the public and the civil society condemned those acts and remarks. However, at the same time there were also people, including politicians, who saw the matter as 'deserving' to women.

According to 'The Maldives study on women's health and life experiences' (2007), 1 in every 3 women between the ages 15 – 49 had experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lifetime¹³. The number of domestic violence cases reported to the Family Protection Authority (FPA) since 2013 has been increasing steadily and evidently, women and girls are mostly at the receiving end of such violence.

There has also been reports of violence against women perpetrated by family members, especially by husbands, while they were trying to exercise their right to vote in elections. For instance, there have been reports that women's National ID Cards are withheld by the husband if he feels that she might vote for a

¹³ The Maldives Study on Women's Health and Life Experiences

contestant he does not approve of, or even beating the wife at the voting venue for the same reason. Given that inflicting violence against women by men is a practice used to maintain unequal status and power relations in societies with male dominant ideologies, the high prevalence of violence against women perpetrated by men, in the Maldives, is an indicator that practices associated with male dominant ideologies or patriarchy is one of the greatest factors contributing to the restriction of women's equal participation in public life.

Other significant, emerging issues that restricts women's participation in politics is the rising conservative religious ideologies. Religious misconceptions about women's participation in public life, especially those that question women's ability to be leaders, threaten to reverse the gains Maldivian women have made over the years. There have been several Friday sermons which reinforce the submissiveness of women¹⁴ to men as well as stereotypical roles and status of women and men in the society¹⁵. However, there are a few prominent religious scholars in the Maldives who openly talk out and educate people against those misconceptions. One such example was the recent publishing of the book 'Does Islamic law permit a woman to be head of state of a Muslim Nation', written by late Dr. Afrashim Ali, which discusses the provisions in Islamic Law which permits a woman to be the head of State of a Muslim Nation.

Way forward/Recommendations

- Include quota's in political party electoral lists
- Temporary special measures to create an equal playing field for women and men
- Proper implementation of laws
- Increase access to campaign financing for women and provide special time for women in media for their campaigns
- Ending impunity of policy makers and law enforcement agents
- Establish low cost childcare facilities
- Sensitization of media to gender and patriarchy
- Remove stereotypical connotations in text books and design it in a way that encourages women's participation in non-stereotypical fields of work, while also addressing male-dominant and conservative religious ideologies promoted through text books
- Create awareness among the public on women's rights and gender equality from a religious perspective

¹⁴ <http://islamicaffairs.gov.mv/dh/images/uploads/khuthubaa%2028.10.2016-26102016090751.pdf>

¹⁵ <http://islamicaffairs.gov.mv/dh/images/uploads/khuthba22.01.2016-21012016092950.pdf>

- Sensitization of policy makers to women's participation in politics