



Madam Chairperson/Mr. Chairperson,  
Distinguished Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great privilege for me and my delegation to participate in this Regional Meeting to Review the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action. First of all, I wish to thank ESCAP and its Executive Director for organizing this Meeting and for making it possible for us to hold a regional consultation prior to the forthcoming Beijing plus five.

Mr./Madam Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Maldives is a very small developing country with a homogenous group of people. However, as a patriarchal society, there are socio-cultural factors, values and beliefs that accord women a lower status in society. Culturally, the woman is constructed as a docile and domestic being and places her in the precincts of the home. In recent years, the Government of Maldives has been working diligently towards raising the awareness of the people on gender equality with the view to changing their attitudes and perceptions. In particular, plans are underway to mainstream gender concerns into the development process.

In the four years since the Beijing Conference, Maldives has attained progress in the critical areas outlined in the Platform for Action. I have to say that we would not have been able to take such strides if not for the strong commitment and support of the Government at all levels.

In the Maldives, one great obstacle to the empowerment of women is the near absence of structures to broaden women's economic opportunities and independence. Lack of access to credit and entrepreneurship is worthy of note. However, several small-scale loan schemes have been recently introduced throughout the country. Of the loans available to both men and women, women have obtained an estimated 25% thus indicating the existing high demand. Now, there are other loan schemes which are designed especially for women to begin their own income generating ventures. The Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Security is planning to broaden this avenue for women by way of establishing a separate credit system to provide women seed money and increase their long-term borrowing power.

Much work has been done in the education sector in increasing the level of schooling available particularly in the outer islands. While equal opportunities exist for girls and boys at all levels of education, girls' have relatively less access to higher secondary and university education than boys. Girls' mobility is reduced as parents are less willing to

send their daughters to other islands for study. However, the situation is improving gradually as parents' are becoming more aware of the importance of educating their girls as well. The increase in the number of schools and the level of schooling available in the islands and the special scholarship programs introduced by the Government have also contributed to the increased number of girls attaining secondary education. A gradual increase in the number of female graduates is also seen as a result of this deliberation.

The highly dispersed nature of the country and the small size of human settlement on most islands pose immense problems to providing balanced access to services and employment opportunities. To overcome these constraints, the government has undertaken a program of relocating people from the very small islands to relatively larger ones. It is hoped that this new development initiative will improve the provision of infrastructure and the delivery of essential services particularly in the provision of maternal and reproductive health services which is crucial for women.

Programs to create awareness on the importance of breast feeding, on malnourishment and deficiency diseases of adolescents, pregnant and lactating women, on reducing the fertility rate, on the effects of smoking and on respiratory infections have increased considerably. Population education and information on HIV and AIDS are also priority areas of concern. As such, these issues have been introduced to the formal school curriculum. The Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Security conducts programs to increase the awareness of students and parents on the negative impacts of early marriage and pregnancy.

Mr./Madam Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Violence against women is a global issue and is also a major area of concern outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action. Maldives is not an exception in this area. Efforts are being made to uncover the full extent of the problem. But the progress is slow as the social stigma attached to victims of violence and sexual abuse hinders them from reporting such cases. However if a case is reported it is dealt with in accordance with the law.

Mr./Madam Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen,

During 1998 and 1999, the Ministry has given particular importance to increasing the political and legal awareness of women. Several workshops have been held to encourage women to assume leadership positions, increase their participation in politics and the decision making process and to raise their awareness on the legal provisions that ensure their rights. For the upcoming 1999 general elections, the number of female candidates contesting for seats in the People's Majlis has increased more than ever before. This increase in the number of candidates is evidence that women too are becoming more aware of the need for their participation in politics and decision making.

The draft National Policy on women has been formulated and is awaiting the necessary endorsement. The policy guidelines will help to further strengthen efforts made by the Government and NGOs working for the advancement of women. It will also act as a conduit to gender mainstreaming and in establishing a Gender Management System, work on which has already begun. The passing of the draft Family Law which will soon appear before the parliament will be a landmark event. The law has codified existing provisions for women which exist within *Shari'ah* and therefore aims to ensure their rights and uplift their status, particularly within the family.

It is evident that there have been some improvement in the portrayal of women in the media over the last few years due to the increased awareness of the equal participation of men and women in the development of the society. The media gradually is becoming more gender sensitive even though progress is somewhat slow. More articles on gender issues appear in the dailies while more programs on gender issues and gender awareness are currently being broadcast and telecast on a regular basis.

Mr./Madam Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Like in all other countries, the focus given to ensuring gender equality and the advancement of women in the Maldives too has changed very much since 1995. The most notable change over the past four years has been the shift in focus from women's development to addressing gender concerns. The government has given priority to the development of women while addressing gender concerns. While acknowledging the continued commitment and support of the government, I wish to note with sincere gratitude, the high priority accorded by the international agencies, such as UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, WHO and many others who continue to support our efforts in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action. I hope, together we will be able to go forward and meet once again in the dawn of the new millenium to celebrate our achievements.

I wish my colleagues and all participants success and best wishes in their deliberations.

I thank you all.