

COMMEMORATING BEIJING IV
19 – 21 May 2003; Paro, Bhutan



MALDIVES

Commitments, Action Plans and Challenges

INTRODUCTION

Since the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995, the Maldives has concentrated on working towards gender equality at a slow, but steady pace. Slow being necessary as experience have shown that, where most of work required is in societal change or changing the mindset of the people through disintegrating long-held beliefs and practices, fast action does not produce the best results. We in the Maldives believe that it is through continuous and constant work aimed at changing long-held beliefs that gender-equality can be achieved and maintained.

Current, GAD Policy in the Maldives broadly focus on:

- Gender mainstreaming through a structured Gender Management System for effective inclusion of gender concerns in all policies, programmes and projects, so as to ensure gender equity in political and socio-economic development,
- Eliminating all existing gender disparities through effective gender mainstreaming, active promotion of gender equity and equality, and where necessary, affirmative action, and
- Establishing gender equity and equality in all spheres.

Priorities in working towards gender equity and equality in the Maldives include:

- Adopting a comprehensive National Gender Policy.
- Gender sensitization
- Strengthening the GMS through capacity building, advocacy and marketing.
- Identifying present and emerging gender issues within all sectors and developing priorities for action.
- Addressing identified gender issues to eliminate discrepancies, allow for equity, and establish equality, and
- Gender-based violence – Violence Against Women, Domestic violence.

Since the Third Commemorating Beijing meeting held in the year 2000, the main focus has been on:

Gender mainstreaming,
The Family Law,
Violence Against Women, and
Implementing CEDAW.

ACTION

1. Gender mainstreaming

- 1.1 A Gender Management System (GMS) based on the Commonwealth model was put in place in 2001, under the Government policy of gender mainstreaming to effectively address gender issues. The basic structures for the GMS are in place, with the establishment of the Gender Equality Council headed by H. E. President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom in December 2001, and the subsequent appointment of Gender Focal Points in all sectors.

Work continues on strengthening the GMS through capacity building, advocacy and marketing.

- 1.2 The Sixth National Development Plan reaffirms gender mainstreaming as a priority policy and incorporates gender as a cross-cutting issue.
- 1.3 Gender sensitization/ orientation activities continue at all levels.

2. Knowledge based advocacy on CEDAW

- 2.1 In October 2003, training on CEDAW was held for Gender Equality Council members, Gender Focal Points and staff of the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Security to:
 - Create awareness on the obligations of the state in ratifying CEDAW and to develop their skills to apply the principles of the Convention in planning for the advancement of women in the Maldives.
 - Provide information on the procedures by which the Convention is monitored by the CEDAW Committee at the United Nations level and discuss the following:
 - The purpose of reporting and key elements of a CEDAW report
 - The initial report of the Maldives reviewed in 2001 and the concluding comments of the CEDAW Committee
 - Issues pertaining to the implementation of the Convention in the Maldives
 - Provide knowledge and skills in the practical application of the principles of the Convention in priority sectors in order to develop a comprehensive approach to women's development.
 - Raise awareness about the significance of the CEDAW Convention as an instrument to plan development and access rights for women through law and policy reform
 - Create clarity on key concepts and principles pertaining to women's rights advocated by CEDAW: equality, discrimination and State obligation under treaty law

Ms Shanthi Dairiam, Director of the International Women's Rights Action Watch, Asia-Pacific, based in Kuala Lumpur, provided the training and facilitated consultations on drawing up a Plan of Action to implement CEDAW in the Maldives and address the issues identified in the Concluding Comments of the CEDAW Committee following the presentation of the initial/first report from the Maldives.

The outcome of the training is a multi-sectoral Action Plan on implementing CEDAW, drawn up by the participants of the training.

- 2.2 Preparations are currently underway to hold a CEDAW training in June this year, in collaboration with the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ). Senior Government officials and community leaders will participate in the four-day training.
- 2.3 The Government is currently looking into undertaking a study of national laws in relation to CEDAW and other relevant standards.

3. The Family Law

- 3.1 The first-ever codified Family Law came into effect on 1 July 2001. Minimum legal age of marriage under the new law is 18, and marriages of underage girls or boys are not allowed under any circumstances.

This new law also specifies the many rights available to women in the Shari'a, such as pre-nuptial agreements to ensure the rights of both parties within the marriage. Pre-nuptial agreements can also lay the foundation for protection of the rights of women in case of unwarranted divorce and polygamy.

The problem of high divorce that had existed in the Maldives is addressed by the Family Law by criminalising spontaneous and unilateral divorce by husbands. Divorce is possible only through the Court system, and is allowed after exhaustive efforts to reconcile the marriage has been undertaken by arbitrators. Both husbands and wives are allowed to initiate divorce within the existing system and may go through this procedure to effect a divorce.

4. Violence Against Women

- 4.1 A campaign to problematise the issues of domestic violence and violence against women was started on 8 March 2002 and culminated in creating public interest and discourse on the issue; as well as encouraging women to take the initiative to break the cycle of violence and in greater support from partner agencies such as the police and health officials.

Under the public awareness campaign, documentaries were produced and posters were published and widely distributed to make the public understand Domestic Violence and/or Violence Against Women (DV/VAW) as an issue not to be tolerated.

- 4.2 An initial training on DV/VAW aimed at setting up a multi-sectoral support system for victims of DV/VAW was organized by the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Security.

Police Officers, Medical Personnel, officials from the Family Court and Ministry of Justice, NGOs, community activists and staff from the Gender and Development section of the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Security participated in the training, which focused on:

- Creating an understanding of DV/VAW in general, and more specifically in the local context,
- Identifying participants' understanding of DV/VAW issues within the Maldives,
- Understanding current practices in addressing issues of DV/VAW.

The outcome of the training is an Action Plan for a multi-sectoral support system to assist victims of DV/VAW, and ongoing work on the issue is based on this Action Plan. The focus now is on developing the required human resources, and on strengthening the necessary institutional mechanisms for a multi-sectoral support system.

- 4.3 Discussions are underway to draw up legislation on violence against women, and with the support of the Attorney General's Office and the Law Commission of Maldives, and the technical assistance of ICJ, it is expected that the draft of a Law on Domestic Violence will be ready by the end of 2004.

5. Other Activities

5.1 Engendering the census process

The Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Security and the Ministry of Planning and National Development are closely working together to engender the census process.

5.2 Women in Politics and Decision-making

Workshops to encourage women into politics and to create legal literacy among women have been held for all the Atolls of the Maldives as well as the five wards of Male' by the end of the year 2001.

New developments since the year 2000 include the first-time ever appointments of women to two senior posts; that of Atoll Chief and High Commissioner.

CHALLENGES

1. Lack of resources

Lack of adequate human and financial resources, and a strong legislative and administrative framework hinder gender mainstreaming efforts.

2. Participation of women in decision-making

Greater representation and participation of women in decision-making positions and more active involvement of civil society also need to be realized to create an enabling environment for the effective working of the GMS.

3. Gender analysis of Budgets

This is an area where almost no work has as yet been undertaken in the Maldives

4. Trafficking in Women

While trafficking is not identified as a problem in the Maldives, we are very much aware of the possibility of the Maldives becoming a host to traffickers due to the large number of expatriate workers (especially unskilled and semi-skilled labour) brought in to the Maldives from regional countries. Further, inter-island migration (especially from the Atolls to urban Male') need to be monitored to ensure that there is no trafficking.

Greater networking and knowledge/expertise sharing within the region is required to address the issue of trafficking.

