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**MALDIVES**

**Commitments, Action Plans and Challenges**

**Ministry of Gender, Family Development and Social Security  
Maldives**

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## **Country Report on the Progress made in implementing the Beijing Platform For Action and The Bhutan Forward Moving Strategies**

Since the Fourth Asia Regional Meeting to Commemorate Beijing, at Paro, Bhutan in May 2003, the Maldives has concentrated on working towards gender equality and equity at a steady speed.

Current GAD Policy in the Maldives broadly focuses 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

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.
- Male participation
- Identifying present and emerging gender issues to eliminate discrepancies, allow for equity, establish equality, and
- Addressing Gender based violence- Violence Against Women, Domestic Violence.

Towards the implementation of the Beijing Platform For Action (BPFA) and the progress made regarding the Bhutan Forward Moving Strategy (BFMS), the National Machinery for the advancement of women, Ministry of Gender, Family Development and Social Security (MGFDSS) of the Maldives has tried to improve and advocate some of the issues that were highlighted in the BFMS, 2003. With the recent transition from an empowerment and integration approach to a gender equality and mainstreaming approach, gender issues are not seen solely as the responsibility of the MGFDSS but as that of all the Ministries, government departments, NGOs and private sector

In line with the priorities of the National Machinery, progress has been made and activities were carried in the following areas:

1. Gender mainstreaming and institutionalising women's development,
2. Health and education of women
3. Human rights and Violence Against Women,
4. Implementing CEDAW
5. Decision making and political participation
6. Engendering the media

## **1. Gender Mainstreaming and Institutionalising Women's Development**

- 1.1 The Gender and Development Section of the Ministry of Gender, Family Development and Social Security acts as the lead agency in advocating and mainstreaming of gender issues and promoting the participation of women in all spheres of the society.
- 1.2 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 the President of the country in December 2001, and the subsequent appointment of Gender Focal Points in all sectors. Work continues on strengthening the GMS through capacity building and advocacy.
- 1.3 Island Women's Development Committees (IWDCs) have been established under the MGFDDSS, in all inhabited islands and all the wards of the capital, Male', to work towards eliminating existing gender disparities and raising the health, education and economic status of women.
- 1.4 The Sixth National Development Plan reaffirms gender mainstreaming as a priority policy and incorporates gender as a cross-cutting issue.
- 1.5 A National Gender Policy has been formulated and has been endorsed by the Cabinet.
- 1.6 Gender sensitization/orientation activities continue at all levels.
- 1.7 The first ever codified Family Law came into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2001, which specifies the many rights available to women in the Shari' a such as pre-nuptial agreements and the rights of women in case of divorce and polygamy.

## **2. Education and Health of Women**

- 2.1 The literacy rate of Maldivian women is among the highest in the South East Asia region. Currently it stands over 95%
- 2.2 There are no differences in the school enrolment rates between boys and girls at Primary and Secondary levels. Although there are fewer women in tertiary and vocational education the number of women completing higher education is growing at a steady rate.

- 2.3 There is no discrimination in the access to educational opportunities but geographical and social factors hinder girls attainment rates and also their ability to utilise the available facilities.
- 2.4 The country has made considerable advances in health over the last decades, reflected in increasing life expectancy rates for both sexes and decreasing maternal and infant mortality rates.
- 2.5 Life expectancy at birth increased from 63 for women and 64 for men in 1990 to 71 for women and 70 for men in 2003. Although, the Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) has been gradually decreasing in recent years, it is still high at 97 per 100,000 live births in the year 2003. The high MMR can be attributed to the difficulties in providing maternal health services and facilities due to the geographical constraints and lack of human resources.
- 2.6 The government recognises the health of mothers and children as a priority area and a number of measures are being implemented in the areas of maternal, child and reproductive health (RH) and family planning (FP). The areas of focus include nutrition, disease control and immunization, maternal and child health, reproductive health and family planning and food safety.

### **3. Human Rights and Violence Against Women (VAW)**

- 3.1 A Human Rights Commission of Maldives (HRCM), an independent and autonomous statutory body created by a Presidential Decree was established on 10 December 2003.
- 3.2 HRCM's main objective is, to protect, preserve and promote human rights in the Maldives in accordance with Islamic Jurisprudence and the constitution of the Maldives as well as regional and international treaties and covenants ratified by the Maldives.
- 3.3 A campaign to raise awareness on the issue of VAW was started in 2002 and culminated in creating public interest and discourse on the issue. Under this campaign, documentaries, posters and TV spots were produced and widely distributed to make the public understand the extent and impacts of domestic violence and violence against women.
- 3.4 The main focus of the MGF DSS at present is the establishment of a multi-sectoral supports system to address gender based violence and assist the victims of violence. This work is based on an Action Plan drawn up with consultation from medical and judicial personnel as well as NGO's, community activists and the staff of MGF DSS. Under the Action Plan:
  - Social Workers were trained at the community level in the capital, Male', in order to build capacity within the community to assist victims of violence.
  - Consultations and sensitisation trainings were conducted with health sector personnel to establish a mechanism of treatment and referral for victims of violence.
  - Nurse from the main tertiary hospital in the capital and 12 regional hospitals have been trained to provide initial counselling sessions for identified victims who come for treatment at the hospital.
  - A qualitative study on women's health and life experiences focusing on experiences of violence and community attitudes on gender based violence has been initiated.

- 3.5 On the judicial front the Attorney Generals Office is reviewing the current legislation from a gender perspective with the help of international consultants in order to assess the current problems and constraints on the legal side. In addition, reviewing and reforming of the criminal justice system and juvenile justice system is in progress.

#### **4. CEDAW Implementation**

- 4.1 The Maldives ratified CEDAW in 1993.
- 4.2 The Ministry has commenced information sessions and consultations at policy level to create awareness on the obligations of the state in ratifying CEDAW and to provide knowledge and skills in the practical application of the principles of the convention for the advancement of women.
- 4.3 A multi sector Action Plan has been formulated in order to incorporate the principles of CEDAW in all sectors.
- 4.4 The Government is currently looking into undertaking a study of national laws in relation to CEDAW and other relevant standards.
- 4.5 The Combined second and third CEDAW report has been prepared.

#### **5. Decision making and Political Participation**

- 5.1 The number of women at the professional and decision-making level has been slowly increasing due to the increase in girls completing tertiary and technical education.
- 5.2 Under an externally funded ongoing project women from three atolls successfully participated in the Leadership training course specifically designed for decision makers at island level.
- 5.3 In an effort to create awareness among island women and encourage them to participate actively in politics, the MGFDDSS has conducted regional workshops for all atolls and wards of the capital, Male', on political participation and legal literacy for women.
- 5.4 Progress made in this regard include the first ever appointment of a woman as an Island Chief in 2000 and an Atoll Chief in 2001. The first ever female High Commissioner was appointed to Sri Lanka in 2002 and currently there are 3 women in the Cabinet.

#### **6. Engendering the Media**

- 7.1 A series of gender sensitization workshops are being held each year from 2003 for media personnel, advocating on gender issues such as violence against women, male participation and women's rights and responsibilities in religion and law.

- 7.2 Television and radio dramas, spots and songs are produced each year with themes related to gender equality, reproductive health and empowerment of women
- 7.3 *Hiyala*, a biannual magazine containing information regarding gender specific issues, particularly for women in the islands and also gives insight into the situation of women in Maldives and elsewhere in the world, is published and distributed to all government departments, schools, NGOs and Ward and Island Women's Development Committee's, Atoll Offices, international organizations based in the country and the media

## CHALLENGES

- The massive tsunami that inundated the region on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December 2004 set back the country by several years of economic development. The disaster has displaced thousands of people and 13 islands had to be evacuated.

This disaster severely affected all the sectors of the country, damaging infrastructure and disrupting projects and programs for the development of the people. There was considerable damage to infrastructure related to basic services such as schools and hospitals. The disaster has completely or partially destroyed a considerable amount of schools and educational facilities, and washing away books and uniforms that are needed to attend school. While this affects both boys and girls, there can be an added disadvantage to girls as parents would be more reluctant to send their female children for education outside their home islands. The damage to the healthcare facilities also has significant consequences for pregnant women as they would require access to specialised care during that time.

The disaster also has had detrimental effects on the livelihoods of women in the affected islands. A lot of the women are experiencing loss of income due to their equipments, tools and materials used for their income generating activities being washed away or being damaged. A lot of the women in the affected islands were involved in fish processing, agriculture, and small income generating activities such as weaving rope, thatch roofs, making curry powder and poultry farming all of which have been very severely affected. This would have negative long term implications especially for the women as there are limited opportunities at island level for a means of income and restrictions on their mobility would make it hard for them to seek alternative sources of income.

- The traditional beliefs that exist in the society act as a deterrent for people to fully accept the concept of gender equality. There are also a lot of misinformation and misinterpretations of what gender equality and empowerment of women entails. Extensive work is required to overcome the negative perceptions regarding gender equality and also to reduce the misconceptions regarding the issue.

- A strong legislative framework is also needed to protect the rights of women.
- The geographical make-up of the country and the absence of regular inter-island transport of established domestic transport systems makes travelling an expensive and time-consuming task. This increases the financial resources for conducting development programs in the atolls.
- The MGFDDSS, as the lead agency for gender issues, needs to be strengthened in order to effectively coordinate gender mainstreaming activities and provide technical support for line ministries. At present the MGFDDSS lacks enough specialist staff to carry out gender mainstreaming and advocacy on the scale that is required. In order to further train the staff, MGFDDSS continues to seek assistance from external sources.

