

# MALDIVES

## Questionnaire to Governments on Implementation of the Beijing Platform of Action (1995) and the Outcome of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Special Session of the General Assembly (2000)

### M A L D I V E S

#### Part One: Overview of achievements and challenges in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

Since the Fourth World Conference on women held in Beijing in 1995, the Maldives has strengthened the efforts towards gender equality and empowerment of women. Gender discrimination in the Maldives is very subtle and is mainly related to cultural and societal norms that cut across the entire country. The geographical make-up of the country also hinders the optimum utilisation of the country's resources for women.

The Maldives consists of a small population inhabiting 199 islands dispersed over a large geographical area. Traditionally Maldivian women and men assume stereotypical gender roles. However, women were involved in various activities in the country's main industry, fishing. While men caught the fish, the women were involved in smoking, drying and processing of fish. Women also played a significant role in the cultivation of crops and making of handicraft.

With the modernisation and diversification of the economy and the resulting rapid economic growth during the past 30 years, the Maldives has undergone considerable advancements in terms of development. However, despite the rapid development of the economy, women have not been able to keep pace with their male counterparts, mainly due to changing over from the traditional methods of fish processing into modern methods which are less labour intensive, as well as the societal norms that prevent women from going out of their home island in search of opportunities.

Even though equal opportunities exist for men and women in the fields of education, health and employment, subtle inequalities exist in terms of women's ability to *utilise* the available opportunities. Statistics reveal disparities in the representation of women in all fields.

The current priorities of the Ministry of Gender, Family Development and Social Security (MGFDSS) as the national machinery for gender and development in the Maldives include:

#### **1. Advocacy and gender sensitisation**

The MGFDSS carries out periodic meetings and workshops to raise awareness on gender issues to all sectors, as well as publishing an annual magazine, *Hiyala*, bulletins and leaflets for disseminating information about the status of women and identifying emerging concerns that restrict the advancement of women.

The MGFDDSS has commenced gender sensitisation sessions for media personnel to utilise media for advocacy. As an outcome of these sessions, dramas, songs and spots raising awareness on gender issues were produced and aired.

## **2. Gender Mainstreaming**

Maldives is currently in a transition period from an empowerment and integration approach to gender equality and mainstreaming. Under this shift in policy a Gender Management System (GMS) based on the Commonwealth model was put into place in 2001, with the establishment of a Gender Equality Council and the subsequent appointment of Gender Focal Points in all sectors.

A National Plan of Action incorporating the Beijing Platform for Action, Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development, SAARC Plan of Action on Women, SAARC Plan of Action on the Girl-Child and CEDAW was formulated and is being incorporated into the annual workplans of the MGFDDSS.

The Sixth National Development Plan and the Vision 2020 of Maldives also have incorporated gender as a crosscutting issue.

A National Policy on the Equality of Women and Men has been formulated and has been approved in principle by the Cabinet.

## **3. Empowerment of Women**

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.

A Micro credit loan scheme was first conducted under an European Union funded project. Loans were disbursed to women in the capital Male' and also to women in two of the outer atolls.

Due to the scheme's success a second micro credit loan scheme was funded by the government. Loans have been disbursed for women in Male'. Both schemes prove to be very successful and in great demand. Work is underway to issue more loans under the scheme to women in selected atolls.

## **4. Gender Based Violence**

A campaign to raise awareness on the issue of VAW was started in 2002. Under this campaign, documentaries, posters and TV spots were produced and widely distributed to make the public understand the subtleties of Gender Based Violence and to encourage women to take the initiative to break the cycle of violence.

The focus is now on developing the required human resource capacity and on strengthening the necessary institutional mechanisms for a multi-sectoral support system for victims of violence.

Specific legislation to deal with gender based violence is being drawn up with the technical assistance of International Commission of Jurists (ICJ).

## **5. Implementing CEDAW**

The Maldives ratified CEDAW with reservations in 1993.

The MGFDDSS has been conducting information sessions and workshops to create awareness on the obligations of the state after ratifying CEDAW and to provide knowledge and skills in the practical application of the principles of the convention for protecting the rights of women.

**Part Two: Progress in implementation of the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action and the further initiatives and actions identified in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Special Session of the General Assembly.**

The Beijing Conference has been a very powerful force in itself, in creating awareness and bringing light to issues, which were previously not given such attention. It has also provided a useful tool to formulate strategies to address gender issues and subsequently assess their success.

**Women and Poverty**

Stereotypical gender roles and women's low mobility and access to resources hinder their participation in income generating activities. The lack of access of women to information on credit schemes and their lack of experience and knowledge in management of loans and financial matters also cause women to be wary to take up such initiatives.

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**Education and training of women**

The Maldives has one of the highest literacy rates in the region. In 1999, the female literacy rate was 99.33% compared to 98.6% of males.

To reach the national target of universal primary education, new schools have been built and older ones upgraded. There is no gender discrimination in the access to or provision of primary education. However, as higher secondary level education facilities are available at selected atolls and as there are no universities in the Maldives with students having to depend on universities abroad for tertiary education, there exists a gender disparity in higher secondary, technical and tertiary education. Efforts are being made to remove the barriers that women face, such as low mobility to enable equal access to higher education.

With the increase in the number of schools and their level of education, and the Government's policy of population and development consolidation which will raise the level of education in the atolls, the situation is expected to improve. There is also greater emphasis on selecting equal numbers of male and female candidates for higher education opportunities.

The National Primary Curriculum has been revised to ensure that there is no gender stereotyping and to eliminate gender bias. For example, in Practical Arts, modules such as needlework, cooking, fishing and carpentry are now available to both boys and girls.

A Career Education and Guidance Booklet had been produced by the Ministry of Education which will help guide secondary students in choosing a career. The booklet doesn't assume that some careers are more suitable for girls or for boys. Similarly, "Youth Challenge", an annual career and higher education fair provides high school students with valuable career information with a component from the MGFDDSS that focuses on orienting students to pursue non-stereotypical professions.

The Island Women's Development Committees (IWDCs) facilitate and provide technical training for island women to increase their opportunities for income generation. A Distance Education Program, conducted by the Centre of Continuing Education, provides educational opportunities for people in the atolls, availing more women from the atolls access to education.

The MGFDDSS gives opportunities to members of Island Women's Development Committees and Ward Women's Development Committees for short term training abroad and for participation in study tours.

### **Women and health**

The Ministry of Health, Department of Public Health and the Society for Health Education, an NGO, conduct various programmes, together with the media, to increase awareness on women's health issues, nutrition, nutrition related diseases, family planning and breastfeeding. Population education is integrated into the formal school curriculum.

A National Nutrition Strategic Plan that addresses women's health and nutrition is under implementation.

The Island Women's Development Committees organise information sessions with regard to women's health, reproductive health, family planning and negative effects of early marriage and early pregnancies.

The geographical make-up of the country and the small populations in individual islands make it difficult to establish healthcare facilities, especially specialist health care in every island. However, with the Government's policy of population and development consolidation by creating growth centres in islands with potential, so that people from the very small islands will migrate to larger ones, it is hoped that the situation will improve.

### **Violence Against Women**

The issue of Violence Against Women (VAW) has received little attention in the past. There is no legislation that specifically deals with Domestic Violence or Violence Against Women and no research has been done to determine the extent or the prevalence of the problem. Victims are reluctant to report violence due to societal stigma and a lack of an enabling environment or a support system.

The issue was discussed on national television for the first time on the International Women's Day of 2001 and a campaign to raise the issues of DV and VAW and to encourage women to

take the initiative to break the cycle of violence, was started in 2002 under which documentaries, posters and TV spots were produced and widely distributed.

An initial training on DV and VAW, aimed at setting up a multi-sectoral support system for victims, was organised by the MGFDDSS. Police officers, health personnel, legislative and judicial personnel, NGOs, community activists and MGFDDSS participated in the training. The outcome of the training is an Action Plan for the establishment of a multi-sectoral support system to assist victims.

The focus is now on developing the required human resource capacity and on strengthening the necessary institutional mechanisms for the support system. Discussions are also underway to draw up legislation on VAW with technical assistance from the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ).

### **Women and the economy**

With the modernisation of the fisheries industry and the introduction of tourism, women's participation in the economy has been greatly reduced. The cultural restrictions on women's mobility together with lack of child care facilities and support from the spouses for working mothers make it difficult to increase women's participation in economic activities.

In order to increase the participation of women in income generating activities the Ministry has been concentrating on raising awareness on the issue of the double burden faced by women. Certain employers such as tourist resorts now offer day jobs to women, and transport facilities to encourage women to work in jobs outside their home islands.

Women still tend to be concentrated in stereotypical jobs and sectors that are traditionally considered female and low representation in traditionally male sectors. Only 2% of architects, engineers and related professionals, 6% of physics and engineering science technicians and 2% of legal professionals are women. On the other hand 100% of nursing and midwifery professionals and 92% of pre-primary education teaching professionals are women.

Island Women Development Committees encourage women to venture into non-traditional professions and also facilitate training opportunities in different fields. Much work still needs to be done to establish childcare facilities and to change cultural beliefs that prevent women from seeking employment away from their home islands.

### **Women in power and decision-making**

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 and the conscious effort by the Government to redress women's low participation in politics. However, women's participation in decision-making and in politics is still relatively low.

The MGFDDSS published a Directory of Women in Senior Government Positions in 1996. This Directory has two major parts. The first section presents a short profile of all the women in

senior positions and the second section looks at the positions by gender and level and also by gender and place of employment. The Directory was distributed to all government departments, NGOs, Maldivian diplomatic and consular missions abroad and international organizations.

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. A landmark change as a result of the recommendation made by the participants of the political and legal awareness workshops was the mandatory inclusion of a female representative from each atoll in the delegations for the Atoll Chiefs' Meetings held every two years. In the past, the meeting was attended only by the Atoll Chiefs and their male assistants, and hence some issues were only discussed from a male perspective. Another development has been the inclusion of women in Atoll Development Committees (ADCs). Currently one fourth of the members of ADCs are women.

Progress made 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.

### **Human Rights of Women**

The Maldives ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993.

The MGFDDSS has commenced information sessions and workshops 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 to protect the rights of women. A multi-sectoral Action Plan on implementing CEDAW has been drawn up as an output of a training on CEDAW held for Gender Equality Council members, Gender Focal Points and staff of the MGFDDSS.

The Government is currently looking into undertaking a study of national laws in relation to CEDAW and other relevant standards.

However, there are certain factors that hinder the institutionalisation and implementation of CEDAW, such as lack of awareness about the provisions of the convention and the existence of a patriarchal culture which emphasises traditional roles of women, as well as widely held gendered social-cultural assumptions often mistakenly accepted as religious understanding.

More work needs to be done to create clarity on key concepts and principles regarding women's rights under CEDAW and regarding the significance of the convention as an instrument to plan development and to protect the rights of women through law and policy reform.

### **Women in the media**

Women generally tend to be objectified and depicted in stereotypical and submissive roles by the media, reinforcing the existing gender relations in the society.

MGFDSS has recently started gender sensitisation workshops for media personnel to advocate and mainstream gender issues and male participation through mass media. Television and radio dramas, spots and songs are produced with themes related to gender equality, reproductive health and empowerment of women.

The Ministry has been publishing Hiyala, a biannual magazine since the Beijing Conference. It is a source of 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. Hiyala is 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.

### **The girl-child**

The girl-child does not face any overt discrimination with regard to gaining education, health services, clothing or nutrition. The Maldivian Girl-Child has equal chances of survival, growth and development as her male counterpart. The situation of the girl-child in the Maldives has improved since the early 1990s. The Law for the Protection of the Rights Children (Maldivian Law No. 9/91) was passed in 1991, soon after the country ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (in 1991).

There are no marked differences in the health of girls and boys. There is also no substantial difference in growth rate or infant mortality rates. Girls have the same opportunities as boys to attain education. As girls face restrictions in mobility to access education opportunities from other islands, the introduction of secondary education in the atolls has been a great advantage for girls in this regard.

After the newly enacted Family Law, which came into effect in 2001, the minimum age for marriage in the Maldives is 18 years. It is illegal to employ a person even in dire familial circumstances who is less than 14 years of age and it is an offence under the Islamic Shari'ah and the Family Law to force a woman or a man to enter into marriage.

The Unit for the Rights of Children (URC), within the MGFDDSS, has established a mechanism to deal sensitively with all cases involving children in difficult circumstances. This includes abuse in all its forms; physical, psychological, sexual neglect and all children whose rights are compromised. Child Protection Workers have been trained and are based in all inhabited islands in the Maldives. They work with vulnerable children who come to their attention.

Work needs to be done to establish adequate legal and structural systems to deal with and support victims of abuse.

### **HIV/AIDS**

The actual confirmed incidence of HIV/AIDS in the Maldives remains at 11 cases amongst locals since 1991. The reproductive health baseline survey of 1999 reveals a high knowledge of



HIV/AIDS and its methods of transmission as a result of an intensive nationwide HIV/AIDS awareness programme conducted by the government. HIV/AIDS information is also included in the school curriculum. Since the program's start in the mid-1980s the momentum has dropped considerably due to the low prevalence of the disease.

There are existing and developing risk factors for contracting the disease such as the high rate of divorce and remarriage, a large youth population, a growing trend of drug abuse among adolescents and youth, and tourism related factors such as a large number of men working away from homes for long periods. Hence the current HIV/AIDS program needs to be revised and strengthened to incorporate surveillance and further research into the prevalence of STIs. Monitoring and gaining understanding of factors leading to vulnerabilities and then designing and implementing cross-sectoral programs aimed at reducing the vulnerabilities is extremely important.

A new HIV/AIDS policy, which is inclusive of gender concerns, has been formulated by the Government and is under consideration.

### **The Family Law**

The Family Law, specifies the many rights provided for 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.

Under the law, minimum legal age of marriage was increased from 16 years to 18 years.

The problem of high divorce that had existed in the Maldives is addressed by the Family Law by criminalising spontaneous and out of court divorce by husbands. Divorce is permitted only through the Court system, and only after exhaustive efforts to reconcile has been undertaken. Husbands who divorce their wives out of court are penalised. Both husbands and wives are allowed to initiate divorce within the existing system.

### **National Policy on the Equality of Women and Men**

National Policy on the Equality of Women and Men has been formulated and is awaiting endorsement by the cabinet.

Main objectives of the National Policy include:

- To effectively incorporate gender concerns in all policies, programmes and projects, to ensure gender equity in political and socio-economic development.
- To eliminate all existing gender disparities through effective gender mainstreaming, active promotion of gender equity and equality, and where necessary, affirmative actions.
- To establish a gender equitable society where all women and men fully enjoy their rights and privileges.

The National Policy on the Equality of Women and Men recognises

- that the equal participation of women and men in decision-making as a means for realising the full potential of women as agents and beneficiaries of development,
- the significance of unpaid domestic and community activities of women to national development.
- that a safe and conducive environment, free from the threat of violence is crucial for all women and men to fully enjoy their human rights.

### **Challenges**

- Lack of empirical evidence on issues related to gender inequality, such as gender based violence makes it difficult to implement programs to combat such problems. Information on the extent of the problem or specific definitions of such issues in the local context is essential for proper action.
- Greater representation and participation of women in decision-making positions and more active involvement of civil society also need to be realised to create an enabling environment for the effective mainstreaming of gender concerns.
- Inadequate human and financial resources of the GMS lead agency, as well as legislative and administrative framework hinder gender-mainstreaming efforts.
- The geographical makeup of the country makes travelling and communication time consuming and expensive.

### **Part Three: Institutional Development**

The Gender and Development Section of MGFDSS acts as the lead agency in advocating and mainstreaming gender issues and in promoting the participation of women in all spheres of the society. The MGFDSS was first established as the “**Preparatory Committee for the International Decade for Women**” in 1979, under the then National Planning Agency. The Committee was renamed the National Women’s Committee in 1981, and again renamed the National Women’s Council in 1986. The Department of Women’s Affairs was formed in 1989 which was elevated as the Ministry of Youth, Women’s Affairs and Sports in 1993, and was finally renamed the **Ministry of Gender, Family Development and Social Security** in 2003.

The **mandate** of the Gender and Development Section of the MGFDSS is as follows

1. Work towards ensuring gender equity in all spheres of life to enable women and men to participate fully and equally in political, social and economic activities.
2. Mainstreaming gender in all policies and programmes for making women’s concerns and experiences too an integral part of the design, implementation and evaluation of developmental activities.
3. Raising awareness on existing gender disparities and cultural prejudices that perpetuate stereotyping of women and men’s roles in society.

The programs carried out by the Gender and Development Section of the MGFDSS is funded by the government as well as bilateral and multilateral donors.

Maldives is currently in a transition period from an empowerment and integration approach to gender equality and mainstreaming. Therefore, gender issues are not seen solely as the responsibility of the MGFDSS but as that of all the Ministries and government departments as well as NGOs.

A Gender Management System, based on the Commonwealth model was introduced in 2001. The basic structures are in place with the establishment of the Gender Equality Council (GEC) in 2001, headed by the President of the Republic and the subsequent appointment of Gender Focal Points in all sectors.

The MGFDSS has carried out knowledge-based advocacy of CEDAW for the members of the GEC and Gender Focal Points, aimed at creating awareness on the obligations of the State in ratifying CEDAW, providing knowledge and skills in the practical application of the principles of CEDAW in priority sectors and to raise awareness about the significance of CEDAW as an instrument to plan development and ensure the rights of women through law and policy reform.

The formation of NGOs in the Maldives has been fairly recent. However, their role in the development of women and in creating awareness about gender issues, women’s reproductive health and family planning in the capital Male’ and in the other islands have been significant. The NGOs that work independently or with MGFDSS on women’s issues include the Foundation for the Advancement of Self-Help in Attaining Needs (FASHAN) and Society for Health Education (SHE).

#### **Part Four: Main challenges and actions to address them**

- 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.
- 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 proposed law on domestic violence and violence against women is expected to set a precedent.
- The lack of empirical data on gender issues makes it difficult to properly assess the present situation. With no established research institutions in the Maldives the MGFDDSS relies mostly on secondary data from other sectors and the census in order to gauge the developments on critical issues. The research capabilities of the MGFDDSS need to be strengthened in order to generate data on gender specific issues.
- The promotion of stereotypical images and the objectification of women by the media reinforces the traditional beliefs regarding women. The MGFDDSS is currently working with the media personnel in order to gender sensitise them and to focus their attention on areas for intervention and also to engage media in advocating gender issues.
- 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.