

A SAFE HAVEN IN THE TIME OF CRISIS

Trigger Warning: Mentions of violence and abuse

"I was 19 years old when I married my boyfriend. I did so against my parent's wishes. Within a year, we had a child. For six years, I suffered through emotional and physical abuse before seeking a divorce. In hindsight, the warning signs are clear.

When we were dating, he would threaten to harm himself over minor disputes. At the time, I thought it was because he loved me. One day, soon after we got married, I was at my parent's house and was watching TV when he came to pick me up. I took some time wrapping my headscarf, and he told me "You will no longer watch TV." When I protested, he put his mouth near my ear and kept screaming, a tactic he would repeat for years, even when I became pregnant.

Sometimes when we fought, he would not let me sleep. He would make me sit up when I started to nod off and would take me to the bathroom and splash water on my face to keep me awake.

He isolated me from my friends, telling me seeing them was a waste of time. When I would go out with my mother, he would call me and keep me on the phone the whole time.

Things started to escalate in the last few years of our marriage. Once, he held me and lifted me by the neck, leaving me choking for breath. I moved out of our bedroom and moved into the maid's room. Our maid had left because she could not tolerate the abuse she was witnessing. He confiscated the keys and raped me every night, saying it was his right as a husband.

For years I considered divorce but stayed for fear of stigma and for our child. Eventually, I filled out a form for divorce. But it was only after I consulted with a lawyer at the Family Legal Clinic that I mustered up the courage to file for divorce. I was lost and I had no idea of my legal rights or that what was happening to me was illegal.

During the consultation, the lawyer explained to me my rights under the Domestic Violence and Family Acts and detailed the procedures for filing for divorce. She told me my case was clear-cut and that all the emotional, sexual and physical abuse I was suffering through was unlawful. It gave me the strength I needed.

Since our divorce I am a happier woman. I am working now, and I live alone with my son. We are now in the midst of a custody battle that has been harrowing."

*– Client Statement Courtesy: UNFPA Maldives.
Featured in: <https://bit.ly/3xiluzA>*

There was a pandemic-sized elephant in the access-to-justice room. As COVID-19 escalated, it seemed as if our chances of meaningfully closing the access to justice gap.

The pandemic left our world reeling; the circumstances being especially hard on women. Forced to bear the multiple burdens of household duties, care work, and career commitments, women have been overwhelmingly affected by the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As well as the increased challenges that many women have been facing during the pandemic, instances of domestic violence, and sexual and gender-based violence cases against women have also been on the rise over this time¹. With many women (and some men) have reported having suffered physical abuse at the hands of their families². Over 550 cases of sexual and gender-based violence were reported to the relevant national authorities during the first six months of the pandemic alone³.

For these women, and others across our geographically scattered islands, effective and easy access to justice and legal aid is a necessity. Unfortunately, it is not the reality.

Although the Maldivian constitution requires legal aid to be given to perpetrators of serious crimes, this focus on crime significantly limits women's access to legal advice, as they are more likely to be the victims. In addition to that, legal services in the Maldives are expensive and difficult to acquire. Pro bono legal aid and services do exist but are even harder to come by.

When Shafeea Riza co-founded the Family Legal Clinic (FLC) in 2014 – along with two other women – her hope was to play a part in remedying this.

FLC is a pro bono legal service clinic, the first one in the Maldives to provide free-of-charge legal consultations in family law, prevention of domestic violence law and sexual harassment cases. On top of this, FLC also conducts awareness programmes targeted for survivors of domestic and gender-based violence.



“The Maldivian population is geographically dispersed across 188 islands, which makes legal representation inaccessible to many. Financial barriers and limited access to lawyers also play a huge part in this,” says Shafeea. “FLC’s mission is to bridge this gap and make these services available for people across the country who can’t afford or access them.”

¹ Human Rights Report 2021, Human Rights Commission of the Maldives

² The Rights Side of Life Survey 2020, UNDP Maldives

³ Gender-Based Violence During COVID-19 Pandemic in the Maldives: An Analysis of Reported Cases, 2021

To support the influx of cases from the COVID-19 crisis and lockdowns, FLC – supported by UNDP Maldives – worked together to increase the number of free legal consultations, organise social media awareness campaigns and run support group programmes for survivors of domestic violence and sexual harassment as well as those financially affected by the pandemic.

Through these initiatives, the goal was not only to provide additional legal aid to clients, but also to offer support and educate the public.

Women’s access to justice is a layered issue, one which is not simply confined to providing affordable legal services and aid. In fact, it runs hand-in-hand with the broader issues of gender equality, power, and equity with barriers to accessing justice rooted in the harmful beliefs and social norms in society.

Increasing the number of women working in the legal field, empowering women to report if they’re

experiencing violence, and providing access for them to seek help through psycho-social and legal counselling are all necessary when considering the best ways to strengthen women’s access to justice, ; alongside encouraging their financial independence, and economic resilience, and creating safe spaces for recovery and reintegration.

Strengthening the Maldivian judicial and legal sector is a core component of strengthening access to justice ; a key pillar of UNDP Maldives’ work on enabling better, more transparent and gender-sensitive governance systems within the country.

Shafeea and her team at the Family Legal Clinic are committed to giving hope and support to women and other vulnerable groups and providing them a helping hand to live a life of respect and dignity that is free from violence and abuse.

For more information about the Family Legal Clinic, visit www.familylegalclinic.org.mv or contact them at +960 3331779 and info@familylegalclinic.org.mv

