



ASSESSMENT OF
WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT
COMMITTEES IN THE
MALDIVES



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ABBREVIATIONS

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women.
CBO	Community-based Organisations
CPP	Civic Participation Project
GDI	Gender-related Development Index
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
IWDC	Island Women's Development Committees
MDP	Maldivian Democratic Party
LGA	Local Government Authority
PPM	Progressive Party of Maldives
TI	Transparency International
TM	Transparency Maldives
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WDC	Women's Development Committees

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INTRODUCTION

Maldivian women are considered amongst the most emancipated in South Asia.¹ The Maldives also ranks the second-highest on the United Nations Gender-related Development Index (GDI) in the South Asia region.² Despite the apparent progress made in the advancement of women, gender discrimination exists in the realm of public service and politics, and platforms for women to participate in the decision-making processes at both the national level and community level are limited. The very few platforms that do exist to promote women's participation, such as Women's Development Committees (WDC), are constrained by a general lack of understanding of the institutional support that is required for such Committees to operate to their full potential.

Transparency Maldives (TM) implemented a program, under its Civic Participation Project (CPP), to increase women's participation at the local level focusing on Women's Development Committees

(WDCs). Despite the fact that WDCs have existed as a platform for women going back as far as 1982, there is still limited understanding of how and why WDCs operate. Existing literature on WDCs provide limited information on the aspirations and motivations of WDC members, the barriers they face, public perception of WDCs, and their relationship with Island Councils. This study was conceived on the notion that interventions designed to strengthen WDCs should be based on the experience and realities of WDCs that operate in the field. Based on this premise, TM set out to undertake an assessment of WDCs in order to gain insight into them, identify challenges and capacity issues and propose recommendations for capacity building of WDCs.

This assessment report is divided into five sections: Section two explains the methodology used while section three provides an overview of the historical development of WDCs as well the participation of women in decision-making in Maldivian society. Section four provides details of the findings of the survey and focus group discussions. Based on the findings of the assessment, the final section provides recommendations for various stakeholder groups.

1. *Maldives: Gender and Development Assessment*, Asian Development Bank (2007), p. 1

2. *Gender-related Development Index*, UNDP (2013), The Gender Development Index (GDI) measures gender inequalities in achievement in three basic dimensions of human development: health, measured by female and male life expectancy at birth; education, measured by female and male expected years of schooling for children and female and male mean years of schooling for adults ages 25 and older; and command over economic resources, measured by female and male estimated earned income.

2

METHODOLOGY

Studies on WDCs in the Maldives are limited, often based on anecdotal information. This study aims to contribute to this information gap by undertaking a national assessment of how WDCs operate in the Maldives, using a mix of both qualitative and quantitative methods. The findings of this study are

based on the content analysis of the desk review, focus group interviews, and a telephone survey undertaken by TM. The use of mixed method research framework was put in place to crosscheck the findings and provide in-depth analysis of the key issues.

Desk Review

This study utilized both primary and secondary sources of available information. Background information on WDCs and the regulatory framework which guides WDCs were reviewed as part of the desk review. Literature on decentralisation and women's role in community development were reviewed for background information. National policies and the legislative framework within which WDCs operate including the 2010 Decentralisation Act,

circulars and regulations published by the Local Government Authority, Ministry of Gender and Law were reviewed to understand the legal foundations of WDCs. The regulatory framework was reviewed to compare theory against practice, and to identify gaps between the regulatory framework and practice. The literature review guided the survey questionnaire development and the focus group interviews.

Focus Groups

TM travelled to 16 atolls during the Parliamentary elections between February and March 2014, and during these trips focus group discussions were arranged with 10 WDCs from 10 different islands. These discussions were conducted with 5-6 WDC members, with each discussion lasting 1-2

hours. The purpose of these discussions was to gain in-depth understanding of daily realities, challenges and experiences WDCs face as they operate in their islands. The focus group discussions also allowed us to probe further into specific issues.



WDC Survey

In order to ensure that the survey results were representative, purposive sampling was used to select 20 WDCs from 20 atolls for the telephone survey. There are 61 registered WDCs with the LGA, making the sample size almost one third of WDCs in the country. The purpose of conducting a telephone survey with 20 WDCs was to explore attitudes and reactions, and to gauge opinions, about various issues relevant to WDCs.

WDCs were selected for the survey based upon island population size across the atolls of the Maldives. The most populated island in each atoll with an existing WDC was selected. The President from each WDC was contacted to participate in the survey. In the event the President was unable to participate, the Vice President of the WDC was contacted instead. In cases where both the President and Vice President were not available for the phone interview, an alternative WDC member provided the input for the survey.

The survey questionnaire was structured to include a mix of 27 open ended and closed questions designed to obtain information on WDC profile and structure; relationship with Island Councils; public support to WDCs; WDC elections; challenges of WDC; and level of women's participation in communities.

Ha. Dhidhoo

HDh. Kulhudhuffushi

Sh. Foakaidhoo

N. Manadhoo

R. Dhuvaafaru

R. Ungoofaaru

B. Eydhafushi

Lh. Naifaru

K. Maafushi

AA. Thoddoo

ADh. Mahibadhoo

V. Keyodhoo

M. Mulah

M. Muli

F. Magoodhoo

Dh. Kudahuvadhoo

Th. Veymandoo

L. Fonadhoo

Ga. Villingili

Ga. Dhaandhoo

GDh. Thinadoo

Gn. Fuvahmulah

S. Addu



Limitations of the study

There were a number of limitations to this study. Firstly, the limited existing literature on WDCs or women's role in decision-making in the Maldives, particularly at the local level, meant that it was difficult to obtain secondary sources relevant to the study. The lack of media coverage on the topic also added to this limitation. Secondly, it was difficult to obtain information from key stakeholders on existing WDCs, particularly a comprehensive and accurate list of WDCs across the country, elected or unelected. Anecdotal information from consultations with communities suggested that there are women's committees that operate in communities but are not necessarily elected. The lack of primary or secondary sources on the Maldives is understandable as, in general, neither policies nor laws in the Maldives are based on research.³ Finally, the research would have been richer had the research timeframe and resources allowed the research team to conduct further focus groups with relevant stakeholders in Malé to gain their perspectives, which may have differed from the perspective of the rest of the country due to the unique nature of the capital city.

3. *Evidence Based Policy in the Maldives*, UNDP (2013) Maldives

3

WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEES

WDC's, formerly referred to as Island Women's Development Committees (IWDCs), have been active in many islands since 1982.⁴ By the early 1990's, Women's Development Committees (WDC) were established in each inhabited island.⁵ Traditionally, in the absence of Community-based Organisations (CBOs) focused on women's empowerment, the WDCs were the main platform that promoted women's empowerment and collective action at the community level. WDCs played an important role in mobilizing women by providing an avenue for women to network, fundraise, collaborate and implement initiatives for community development.⁶ With the enactment of the Decentralisation Act in 2010, WDCs today are a legal entity, with a strong mandate on promoting women's participation at the local level.

4. *Maldives NGO Shadow Reprt to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Hope for Women* (2012), p. 42

5. *Strengthening Decentralised Governance in the Maldives, Joint Government and UNDP Mission* (October 2005), draft report, Page 4.

6. *Women in Public Life in the Maldives - situational analysis*, UNDP (2011), p. 23



3.1 History of WDCs

Pre-2010

The mandate of the IWDCs were fairly broad and gender specific – to attend to issues of relevance to women. In reality, this often translated into cleaning the island, conducting training on arts and crafts; and cultural and sports events. The IWDCs were directed by regulations from the then Ministry of Gender and were provided with an allowance from the Ministry.⁷

According to a 1999 CEDAW Maldives States report, IWDCs were heavily involved in the dissemination of information on women, children and family planning.⁸ The 2006 NGO Shadow Report to the CEDAW Committee, recounted a much

bleaker picture of WDCs. The report noted that “social conditioning and the influence of island leadership keeps IWDCs in a stereotypical women’s niche”. This report raised concerns that WDCs were cornered into a specific type of work, disempowered, and held limited capacity to progress into a wider scope.

Despite the stereotypical gender role IWDCs were confined to, it must be noted that IWDCs remained an integral part of the support structure in communities. Some IWDCs are noted for being both productive and active, and as equal partners with Island Development Committees, while other IWDCs remained dysfunctional.⁹ For instance, the IWDC in Thaa Atoll Hirilandhoo built a women’s cafe or ‘*sai hota*’, and raised funds to build their own office building.

7. *Study on the Decentralisation Process in the Maldives*, (2013), UNICEF, p. 12

8. *Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women*, Initial reports of States parties, Maldives, UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (28 January 1999), p. 15

9. *Maldives NGO Shadow Report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women*, Hope for Women (2012), p. 43



WDCs after 2010

When the landmark Decentralisation Act was passed, the entire framework of local governance was transformed, with a legal mandate for WDCs introduced for the first time and their remit significantly broadened.

The Decentralization Act stipulates that a WDC should be established in each island (Article 35a). Operating under an Island

Council, Article 36 of the Act specifies a host of responsibilities for WDCs including:

- (a) Advising Island Council on matters related to island development and municipal services provided by the Council;
- (b) Conducting various activities for income generation and for the development of women;

(c) Working to uphold the rights of women;

(d) Working to increase political participation of the women.

Since the passing of the Act, only one WDC election has taken place, in November 2012. According to Article 35(b), the re-established WDCs were elected through a vote of all the voting-age women in each island, with a term of 3 years for the Committee Members.

The Act also stipulates that the WDCs can generate income, acquire assets and conduct business transactions. The mandate of WDCs in the Act also show a significant change from past IWDCs in that the new the WDCs are required to conduct activities and programmes to increase women's political participation; and are also envisaged as fulfilling an advisory role to the Island Councils, and as equal partners in development matters.

Some of the major policies that have had an impact on WDCs since the Act include the withdrawal of funding for WDCs, which is widely observed as an immense blow to WDCs with reports suggesting that at the island level "women's architecture is undergoing a systemic dissolution".¹⁰ In November 2013, an amendment to the Decentralized Act was proposed in order to restructure WDCs to be replaced by an Advisory Committees for Women's

Development for the Island Council.¹¹ More recently, a recommendation was also made to amend the Decentralisation Act to reduce the number of Local Councils.¹² At the time of writing no decisions have been made on these proposed amendments and it is unclear what implications these amendments will have on WDCs.

10. UNDP (2011), p. 27

11. Nazeer, Ahmed, *Government proposes abolishing Women's Development Committees*, Minivan News (March 2014)
<http://minivannews.com/politics/government-proposes-abolishing-women%E2%80%99s-development-committees-81252>
Accessed on: November 30, 2014.

12. Rasheed, Zaheena, *Committee passes budget, recommends constitutional amendment to reduce independent commissions*, Minivan News (November 2014)
<http://minivannews.com/politics/committee-passes-budget-recommends-constitutional-amendment-to-reduce-independent-commissions-91321>
Accessed on: November 30, 2014.



3.2 Women's participation in decision-making roles in the Maldives

The context in which WDCs operate is best understood by examining the barriers women face across the country in climbing the socio-political ladder. According to the 2013 Democracy Survey conducted by TM, the political knowledge of Maldivian women is, on average, higher and women are more politically active at the community level than men.¹³ However, this rarely translates into decision-making or leadership roles for women, or even equal participation in political affairs, both at the local level and national level.

It is noted that the political playing field in the Maldives is not conducive to women's participation due to numerous barriers. A combination of male dominated political structure, lack of financial resources to support women candidates, and the absence of education and training opportunities to build leadership skills discourage women from aspiring to stand for leadership roles. Socio-cultural and religious beliefs which confine women to home-based traditional roles also discourage women from taking up public office. Public attitude towards women's leadership and gender equality is revealed in the 2013 Democracy Survey, in which 62% of the population agree that men make better leaders than women.¹⁴

The effect of the above-mentioned structural barriers for women and the general public attitude towards women's role in decision-making is evident by the low level of women's participation in politics. The Maldives is currently ranked 129th place in the Inter-Parliamentary Union's index of parliaments in terms of gender balance. During the Parliamentary Elections held in March 2014, out of a total of 302 candidates for 85 seats, only 23 were female. Of these, only 5 were elected. Furthermore, during the Local Council elections held in January 2014, women comprised 222 candidates from a total of 2754 contestants. Of these, out of the 1118 elected for the local council, only 61 were female.

In principle, WDCs are platforms for women leaders at the community level to actively engage in improving women's social and economic conditions, and can be taken as a stepping stone for women to move up the socio-political ladder. However, as a result of the larger systemic and cultural barriers that pose challenges for women, it is yet to be seen whether WDCs will translate into increased participation of women in decision-making roles.

13. *Democracy at the Crossroads - The results of 2013 Maldives Democracy Survey*, Transparency Maldives (2014), p. 45

14. *Ibid.*, p. 26

4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Composition of WDCs

- 18 -24 years ● Of the 20 WDCs surveyed, the average membership base is 6, with members ranging from 3 in some WDCs to 9 in others. The average age of a WDC members falls within the range of 35-44 years old. In terms of the overall age distribution, 8% of participants fall within the 18-24 years age bracket, 28% fall within the 25-34 years age bracket, 58% fall within the 35-44 years age bracket, and 5% falls into the 45-54 years age bracket. Only 1% of WDCs members are 55 years or older.
- 25-34 years ●
- 35-44 years ●
- 45-54 years ●
- 55+ years ●

- PPM ● ● One of the concerns raised across all the focus group discussions was that political
- MDP ● ●
- JP ●
- Independent ●

rivalry between members from different political parties sometimes affected cooperation amongst WDC members. The survey findings suggest that an average WDC has a diverse political membership base. On average, WDCs were composed of 2 members from Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM), 2 members from Maldivian Democratic (MDP), 1 member from Jumhooree Party (JP) and 1 independent member.

4.2 Operations of WDCs

In order to get an understanding of the key activities of WDCs, the focus group discussions and the survey sought to understand the key activities WDCs engaged in and the operations of WDCs. Findings from the survey and the focus group discussions indicate that the primary activities WDCs conducted were cleaning programs, social awareness programs related to health education and religion,

sports events, fundraising activities, and sewing and cake courses.

Given that the work WDCs engage in are largely limited to the above-stated activities, there is a need to scale up their work from these traditional roles associated with women to those that falls within the mandate of WDCs, such as advising the council on development matters, uphold-

ing the rights of women and increasing women's political participation.

In order to examine the operations of WDC, the study also looked at how frequently WDCs conducted meetings. One of the interesting findings of the survey was that 30% of the WDCs held their meetings once or twice a month while a

majority (70%) held their general meetings on a weekly basis. 75% of WDCs reported that these general meetings were held at the Island Council office. The frequency of WDC meetings indicate, contrary to common perception, that WDCs are organised and active regardless of the types of activities they undertake.

4.3 Relationship with Island Councils

It is imperative that a strong collaborative working relationship is developed between WDCs and Island Councils for WDCs to fulfil their responsibilities as specified in the Decentralization Act (Article 35).



The survey and the focus group discussions probed into different aspects of the dynamics between WDC's and Island Councils. Of the WDCs that participated in the survey, 70% agreed that they received some level of support from their respective Island Councils. When asked to rate the level of Island Council support in the implementation of their activities, on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, 1 being "not satisfactory" and 5 being "extremely satisfactory", WDCs rated the level of council support with an average score of 3.68. This is close to a "satisfactory" level of support.

In terms of the nature of support provided by Island Councils, **68% of WDCs stated**

that they mostly received support from the Island Councils on administrative matters. 45% of WDCs surveyed stated that the councils provided assistance in securing office space and allows WDCs to use the Island Councils' computers, fax machines and phones.

54% of WDCs noted that they had "excellent" working relations with their respective Island Councils. While this is encouraging, the remaining 46% of WDCs rated their experience of working with the Island Council as "poor". More concerning is that **55% of WDCs report that they are not consulted in matters related to island development.** This is in violation of Article 35(a) of the Decentralisation Act, which states that Island Councils are mandated to consult WDCs on matters related to island development and municipal services. When investigated further, WDCs felt that the reason for not consulting with them on such matters was because Island Councils regard WDCs with little or no respect and have an attitude of general disregard for women's opinion.

4.4 Knowledge

It is important that WDCs have a good understanding of the legal framework under which they operate to ensure that they fully grasp their roles, responsibilities and rights. All WDCs that participated in the survey and the focus group discussions were asked about their knowledge of the Decentralization Act, and specifically the mandate of WDCs. On a Likert scale of 1 to 5, 1 being “not at all” and 5 being “very well,” WDCs rated how much they know about the (i) Decentralization Act and (ii) the mandate of WDCs.



WDCs' knowledge on the Decentralization Act was rated with an average score of 2.75, indicating that their level of understanding of the Act falls between “very little” and “somewhat”. We can infer from

this finding that WDCs do not feel that they possess enough information about the legal framework under which they operate.



Interestingly, the surveyed WDCs rated their knowledge and understanding of the WDC mandate as high. On a scale of 1 to 5, WDCs rated their knowledge of the mandate of WDCs with a score of 4.35, falling in between “quite a lot” and “very well”. Although this indicates that WDCs possess a good overall understanding of their mandate and the scope of their work, it must be noted that this is based only on self-reporting. Furthermore, it must be questioned whether this level of knowledge actually translates into their operations.

4.5 Public support

WDCs rated the level of public support for their activities on three aspects: (i) public attendance and participation in their activities and events; (ii) involvement in activity planning and; (iii) involvement in activity implementation. Rated on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “no support” and 5 being “excellent”, public support for WDC activities was felt to be high. Participation and attendance were both rated highly with an average score of 4.25 out of a

5, indicating that the public does receive WDC activities positively.

It remains to be seen whether WDC activities aimed at increasing the scope of their involvement in the decision-making process, and more closely aligned with their mandate as set out in the Decentralisation Act, would be as equally well received by the public.



4.6 Key challenges

While it is noted that there is a need for WDCs to scale up their work from traditional gender roles to those stipulated in the Decentralization Act, there are many barriers which limit WDCs from fulfilling their new mandate.

Some of the commonly cited challenges from the survey and the focus group discussions include financial and resource constraints, poor working relationships with the Island Councils, political rivalry of members, a lack of commitment or low motivation from WDC members, and negative public perceptions towards women in public life.

A lack of an allocated budget for WDCs and challenges in fundraising were the most commonly stated challenge. The absence of a budget denied many WDCs from acquiring the resources required to successfully conduct and implement their planned activities. Administrative difficulties, especially with respect to a lack of a permanent office space for WDCs and having to rely on the council for all administrative support, was noted as a key challenge. Furthermore, many WDCs noted that the absence of an allocated monthly salary to WDC members impacted their motivation to work.

Poor working relationships with the Island Councils, specifically the lack of cooperation from the Councils in conducting WDC activities, and the disregard for ideas

proposed by WDCs were also noted as a major challenge for a number of WDCs.

Political rivalry between WDC members was also stated as a challenge for WDCs, creating discord amongst the committee members and affecting their work. One WDC indicated that half the women in the island associated with Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) refused to participate in the activities of the WDC because the WDC members represented a Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) majority.

In addition to taking stock of the challenges under which WDCs operate, the study asked the WDCs themselves what they thought can be done to overcome such challenges. Suggestions proposed included building better working relationships with the councils, exploring avenues for fundraising, improving the leadership of WDCs and challenging negative public perceptions through educational programs and awareness campaigns.



4.7 Position of Women

The survey also sought to explore the level of participation, particularly of women, in both political and social activities conducted in the island. On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being “very low” and 5 being “very high”, WDCs were asked to rate the level of women’s participation. The perceived level of women’s participation in political activities received an average score of 4.75, while participation in social activities scored 4.35. The findings indicate that women’s participation overall is very high at the island level, as perceived by WDC members. In addition to the functions and operations of WDCs, the study aimed to explore other factors affecting women in island communities.

According to 65% of WDCs that participated in the survey, equal opportunities for men and women do not exist in their island. What is more striking is that a significant majority (80%) of participants believe that there is no work undertaken by the community to provide equal opportunities for women, or to advance equal rights and opportunities for women.

WDCs were further probed about women’s representation at the institutional level, specific to their island. According to 85% of WDCs, more men than women dominate the institutions in the island. Furthermore it was emphasized that male dominance was more commonplace in leadership and decision-making roles.



4.8 WDC election and aspirations of WDC members

In order gain insight into the motivations and aspirations of WDC members, questioned were posed about the reasons for contesting WDC membership. **75% of participants expressed that their motivation for WDC membership was to work for the development of their island, while 70% indicated that their main reason for running for WDC membership was to empower women and increase women’s participation in politics.**

The study also delved into WDC views on the framework for WDC elections. **70% of WDCs that participated in the survey**

were of the opinion that men should be able to contest for WDC membership.

Focus group discussions indicated that because men are not allowed to contest WDCs, this consequently also excluded WDCs as equal development partners; instead WDCs were thought to be perceived as Committees to promote women’s participation only by women. **Furthermore, 89% of survey participants suggested that men should be able to vote for the WDC election to ensure inclusivity.** Additionally, focus group interviews stressed on the importance of men’s input on issues relevant to women and of men’s partici-

pation in the efforts to uphold women's rights and achieve women's development.

To probe further into the motivations and aspirations of WDC members, survey respondents were asked whether any one member of the committee contested or considered contesting the local council elections. It was an important consideration in the survey to test WDC members' political ambitions, specifically to see if there was an appetite by WDC members to scale up their work from WDC membership to local council membership - a leadership position that would allow for more direct engagement with citizens.

74% of respondents expressed that members did not contest for the local council elections nor consider such a

move due to a number reasons. One of the reasons included women prioritizing their personal life over public life. As a lot of WDCs members are mothers with young children, without having a caretaker to look after their children, and as a result they are unable to engage in politics as a full-time job and prefer to limit their commitment to WDC membership. Other reasons included public perceptions and attitudes towards women in politics. Women feel that there is a general lack of respect for women in politics and public scrutiny geared towards women, undermining their ability as leaders and prevent them from running for council office. Furthermore, at the island level, instances of anti-campaigning against women have further dissuaded them from running for office.



4.9 Training needs

Five key capacity needs were identified by WDC respondents from the survey and the focus group discussions.

WDCs identified the need for training on proposal writing, budgeting and fundraising, as the lack of such skills prevented them from exploring other potential avenues for fundraising. Interviewees noted that such training would help offset one of their key challenges: budgetary constraints. The skills to write a successful project proposal budgeted accurately, and training on methods and strategies of fundraising will allow WDCs to expand

their financial resource base by tapping into other external sources of funding. Additionally, community mobilization and facilitation skills were identified as lacking amongst WDCs members. Effective communication skills and assertiveness were identified as necessary skills for women in the political arena to effectively work with communities in carrying out their work. Furthermore, WDCs emphasized the need for training on various strategies and techniques for community mobilization.

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CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

WDCs are not only a traditional women’s institution in the Maldives, but an important platform for women to enter into politics and to participate in the decision-making process of island development. Despite the fact that WDCs do not operate as mandated in the Decentralisation Act, it is paramount that WDCs continue to exist and adequate support mechanisms are developed to steer WDCs to fulfil their mandate. It is hoped that the findings from this assessment provide further impetus for the relevant authorities to establish better coordination amongst stakeholders to meet the needs of WDCs and to implement effective capacity building initiatives.

A number of studies emphasize the need to make concerted effort to increase women’s political participation, and one of the crucial steps towards achieving this goal is to better harness existing platforms available for women such as WDCs.

The following is a list of recommendations based on our research findings. These recommendations intend to provide a basis for the development of strategic actions that promote the role, participation and representation of women in public life.

Recommendation 1: Island Councils must consult WDCs as stipulated in the Decentralisation Act.

Findings of the study highlight the need to develop a stronger working relationship between Island Councils and WDCs. As stipulated in the 2010 Decentralization Act, WDCs are mandated to advise the Island Council on matters related to island development and municipal services provided by the council. It is recommended that the council makes a conscious effort to consult and include the representation of WDCs in decisions regarding such matters. This in turn will help to develop a strong, collaborative working relationship between the Island Councils and

WDCs, ensuring that community issues are addressed in an inclusive manner without excluding women.

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Recommendation 2: Clarify the role of regulatory bodies and support structures in relations to WDCs.

The role of regulatory bodies and support structures need to be made clear.

Due to changes in government policy, there is confusion amongst WDCs with respect to who their oversight body is and support structures are. As of now it is unclear who is responsible for providing

trainings for WDCs or promoting WDCs – whether it is the LGA or the Ministry of Law and Gender. It is crucial that WDCs are aware of their regulatory bodies and have access to such support structures and relevant sectoral ministries and regulatory bodies are clear of their role as oversight and support structures.

.....

Recommendation 3: Build the capacity of WDCs to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills.

As findings of the study show, awareness of WDCs need to be increased on the decentralisation framework, to ensure that they have a clear understanding of their roles, responsibilities and rights. In addition to this, targeted capacity building initiatives, based on the needs of WDCs, need to be rolled out to ensure that they are equipped with the required knowledge and skill set, for them to be able to tackle the new mandate given to them by

the Decentralisation Act.

LGA, Government ministries and CSOs must take a lead in this effort. LGA can introduce an induction program for WDCs, in partnership with relevant government ministries and CSOs. Additionally, a concerted effort needs to be made to develop targeted capacity building programs for WDCs, focusing on specific training needs.

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Recommendation 4: Island Councils should develop resource sharing mechanisms to support WDCs.

As findings of the study show, one of the main challenges facing WDCs is the lack of resources and facilities available for them to fulfil their functions. One of the chief concerns of WDCs is the lack of a meeting space and access to basic facilities such as phone, internet and fax. Since each Island Council have access to such

resources, sharing these with WDCs can be explored as a viable and cost-effective option. It must be noted that some Island Councils already have such mechanisms in place, however, this needs to become the norm instead of the exception. It is recommended that the oversight body for WDCs facilitates this process.

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Recommendation 5: Provide financial support for WDCs and secure additional sources of funding.

As the findings show, the lack of financial resources available for WDCs is a key challenge. Efforts must be made to unfreeze WDC bank accounts and allocate a budget for WDC operations including an

allowance for WDC members in order to incentivise members to undertake their responsibilities. It is also recommended that WDCs explore other sources of funding for sustainability.

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Recommendation 6: Stakeholders should promote the role of women in public life and decision-making.

As the study findings highlights, the negative perception and attitudes towards women in the public arena is a challenge for WDCs. This can be negated through public awareness raising programs highlighting the importance of an inclusive approach for development and stressing the significance of women's role in public life and decision-making. Such efforts also should target school children as attitudes towards gender are developed

at a young age. Gender sensitization programs targeting political parties, MPs and media need to be conducted as they have an important role to play to promote the participation of women in the public arena. Political parties also need to play a more active role to promote women in politics. Ongoing CSO-led gender sensitization efforts need to be supported and scaled up to ensure these programs reach a wider audience.

.....

Recommendation 7: Men should be able to contest in and vote for WDC elections

Promoting women's political participation and addressing gender issues are often seen as the sole responsibility of WDCs or women. This view is further promoted as WDCs consist only of women and WDCs are the only party entrusted with the responsibility of promoting women's issues at community level. Allowing men to compete in and vote for WDC elections could be an option that could be explored to overcome this gender segregation.

Following further study, a percentage of seats on WDCs can be allocated for men. Such a change could increase the ownership and receptivity to WDC activities by the larger community.

6

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ANNEX 1: SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

.....

Key activities carried out by WDCs include island cleaning programs, conducting social awareness programs and sewing and cake courses, organising sports events and fundraising events.

.....

A strong majority of WDCs (70%) hold their general meetings once weekly or more, indicating that, unlike common perception, WDCs are organised and active regardless of the types of activities they undertake.

.....

75% reported that these general meetings were held at the Island Council office.

.....

Overall, of the WDCs that participated in the study, 70% agreed that they received some level of support from their respective Island Councils.

.....

In terms of the type of support, 68% stated that they received support from the Island Councils on administrative matters mostly. 45% of participants surveyed stated that the Council provides assistance in securing office spaces and allows WDCs to use the Island Council office's computers, fax machines and phones.

.....

In terms of the level of Island Council's support in the implementation of their activities, participants stated that they were "satisfied" with the support extended by the Island Council.

.....
54% of WDCs that participated in the survey indicated “excellent” working relationship with their Island Council while the remaining 46% of WDCs rated their experience with working with the Island Council as “poor.”

.....
However, 55% of WDCs that participated in the survey report that they were not consulted in island development matters.

.....
WDCs knowledge of the 2010 Decentralization Act is low while their understanding of the mandate of WDCs is high.

.....
Public support for the activities conducted by WDC is generally high.

.....
Level of women’s participation in both social and political activities at the local level is very high.

.....
Challenges and limitations commonly affecting WDCs include financial and resource constraints, poor working relationship with the Island Council, political divisions between WDC members, lack of commitment or low motivation from WDC members, and negative public perceptions towards women in public life.

.....
Suggestions proposed by WDCs to address the limitations and challenges faced include building better working relationships with the councils, exploring avenues for fundraising, improving the leadership of WDCs, and challenging negative public perceptions through educational programs and awareness campaigns.

.....
According to 65% of WDCs, equal opportunities for men and women do not exist in their island.

.....

A significant majority (80%) of WDCs believe that there is no work undertaken by the community to provide equal opportunities for women, or to advance equal rights and opportunities for women.

.....

According to 85% of WDCs, more men than women dominate the institutions in the island. Furthermore it was emphasized that male dominance was more commonplace in leadership and decision-making roles.

.....

Amongst reasons for contesting for WDC membership, 75% of interviewees expressed that their motivation was to work for the development of the island, while 70% indicated that their main reasons for running for WDC membership was to empower women and increase women's participation in politics.

.....

70% of WDCs that participated in the study were of the opinion that men should be able to contest elections for WDC membership.

.....

89% of participants suggest that men should be able to vote for the WDC election to ensure inclusivity.

.....

A significant majority (74%) of WDCs identified that their members did not contest for the local council elections nor considers running for the local councils. Reasons stated are: to prioritize personal life over public life; due to negative public perceptions and attitudes towards women in politics; and anti-campaigning against women.

.....

Five key areas were identified for capacity building include project proposal writing, budgeting, facilitation skills, fundraising strategies and community mobilization.



Transparency Maldives, the National Contact of Transparency International (TI), is a non-partisan organisation that promotes collaboration, awareness raising and other initiatives to improve governance and eliminate corruption from the daily lives of people. Transparency Maldives (TM) views corruption as a systemic issue and advocates for institutional changes that will punish and prevent corruption.

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