



## Position Paper

# Women's Political Representation

## 1. Introduction

Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals is focussed on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. This includes a commitment to ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life.

Article 17 of the Maldivian Constitution guarantees equality regardless of gender and favours special measures for the protection of disadvantaged individuals and groups. While the Maldivian legal system is largely gender insensitive, both de jure and de facto, laws that commit to gender equality have been enacted in the past few years. Among this, a fundamental law is the Gender Equality Law, which sets out provisions to bridge gender gaps in political, economic, and family life in the Maldives. The Maldives has also ratified multiple relevant international treaties and conventions, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which calls on states to ensure women's equal rights to vote and hold elected office.

Despite these provisions, the level of women's political participation is dismal. Women's representation in the Maldives' Parliament is abysmally low, with women making up only five of 85 members. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Maldives ranks 178th out of 188 countries for the percentage of women in the Parliament. The recently elected Cabinet has seven women out of 22 ministers. Additionally, there are nine ministerial positions with only men, and of 48 State Ministers, only ten are women. Beyond these high level positions, women's representation in local councils is also disproportionately low. Multiple attempts to introduce temporary special measures, such as women's quotas, to increase women's representation in the Parliament have been unsuccessful, indicating a lack of political will to ensure gender equality in political representation.

In spite of this, and although the number of women contesting in elections is extremely low, women's participation in political parties and grassroots activities is significantly high. This includes women's participation in campaign activities, rallies, and protests. The disjuncture between women's grassroots participation and representation in decision-making roles is noteworthy and problematic, and requires immediate and long-term measures to address.

## 2. Importance of women's political representation

Gender equality is necessary to ensure a responsive and accountable democratic society. Because women have different experiences, different needs and different perspectives than men, involving women as decision makers can help ensure that women's needs are taken into account in the development of government policies. This is essential in the Maldives, where discriminatory laws and policies have facilitated gender inequality and discrimination against women. Women's inclusion, therefore, contributes to credibility and legitimacy of elected institutions and government structures.

The Maldives had its first democratic multi-party presidential election in 2008. However, the country's democratic aspirations were short-lived with the newly elected government coming to an abrupt end due to an alleged coup, plunging the country into political turmoil. Since then, the Maldives has seen six years of political unrest made worse by democratic backsliding and the derogation of civil and political rights. However, the recent change in government after the presidential election in September 2018 has restituted democratic hopes once again. In this new political climate where the energy of the new government seems to be focussed on rebuilding democracy, there are two fundamental reasons why the State must focus on women's political participation:

- Excluding women in this initial and fundamental stage would be a lost opportunity to have an inclusive and broadly representative voice to democratically influence the policy priorities that will impact the future of the country.
- Excluding women in this transitional period replicates gender inequality and perpetuates and reinforces societal attitudes that hinder women's rights and encourage discrimination against women.

## 3. Challenges to women's political representation

The Maldives made significant progress in areas such as education and health, making it South Asia's only "MDG+" country. However, gender equality and women's equal political participation and representation in decision-making are yet to be adequately achieved. Despite democratic progress the Maldives is making, there is growing concern that increasing social conservatism and radicalisation are exacerbating gender imbalance and even reversing the progress made over the years.

The economic and political context and social fragmentation on the one hand, with efforts to establish democratic practices on the other hand, have a significant influence on gender equality and women's political participation in the Maldives. Women who want to run for political positions often are restricted by socio-cultural constructions of gender roles. Those who are able to overcome such barriers face financial challenges and lack of technical capacity among others. Some of the key challenges women face in accessing political space are as follows:

### 3.1 Lack of financial support

A key challenge faced by women candidates is the lack of sufficient funding needed to contest for office. The resources required for a successful campaign has increased significantly and campaigns have become extremely expensive given the widespread electoral clientelism and vote buying. Although the State provides funding to political parties under the Political Parties Act, the funding is disbursed to political parties based on their membership. The funding is not tied to any gender considerations, such as requiring that a certain amount of funds be disseminated to women candidates. While political parties provide funding to candidates, there is no systemic mechanism within parties to provide special support to women candidates. This puts women at an extremely disadvantaged position. Beyond standard campaign costs, women's disproportionate responsibility to care for children represents significant financial and time barrier to their active political participation due to the cost and low availability of childcare options

### 3.2 Lack of technical support

While women are actively involved in grassroots mobilisation and assisting in conducting door-to-door campaigning, there is a striking technical knowledge gap when it comes to effective campaigning, lobbying, fundraising, budgeting, legislative drafting, constituency relations, and public speaking. This significantly impacts women's interest and confidence in running for political positions. While some political parties do conduct trainings, not all women candidates, especially women aspiring to political positions, receive trainings in technical areas to be more effective in decision-making positions.

### 3.3 Portrayal of women in media

Both traditional and contemporary media tend to use infantilising and objectifying language when discussing women in politics. Instead of focussing on a woman's qualifications and professional achievements, the fixation is almost always on her physical appearance, choice of clothes, and private life. Sexist and sexualised photoshopped photos intended to shame women in politics are often circulated on social media, which according to a study conducted by International Foundation for Electoral Systems in 2015 is one of the main reasons why some women candidates refrain from including a photo of themselves in their campaign posters. Such exploitative portrayals of women discourages women from contesting for office.

### 3.4 Socio-cultural beliefs and gender roles

In the Maldives, the primary role of a woman is perceived to be that of a wife and mother. This notion is often promulgated through religious beliefs that insist that a woman's place is at home and that a country led by a woman leader is destined to become morally corrupt. Such conservative and increasingly radicalised voices often dominate public discourses surrounding women's public and political life. These voices insist that women are subordinate to men and that men are protectors of women to argue against gender equality. Such notions not only hinder women from meaningfully participating in politics, but also contribute to violence against women. For instance, there are cases where women voters were physically assaulted by their partners for not voting in the way their partners wanted.

## 4. Recommendations

- Political parties and civil society must build the technical capacity of women candidates and women aspiring to political positions by providing trainings in areas such as effective campaigning, fundraising, and public speaking.
- Political parties must allocate funding as a temporary special measure for women candidates.
- Political parties must adopt mechanisms for voluntary quota for women, particularly for party leadership positions and for Parliamentary and Local Council Elections.
- Political parties must empower the women's wing of political parties with a focus on reaching out to island levels.
- Political parties must conduct sensitisation for national/atoll/island level party leadership to encourage them to recruit women for party activities.
- Civil society organisations should conduct gender sensitisation programs for journalists and media organisations.
- Civil society organisations should conduct awareness raising activities to encourage the participation of men in household work and childcare responsibilities, to reduce the double-burden on women and increase acceptance about the responsibilities of men in the domestic sphere.
- Civil society and political parties can advocate for electoral reforms – such as tying provisions of public funding to the number of women candidates as party nominations, and/or adopting a women's quota – that would substantively increase women's political representation.