

## WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE MALDIVES

Women in the Maldives remain underrepresented in leadership roles within the political sphere, especially in elected offices, despite several legislative improvements.

This includes the adoption of the Gender Equality Law in August 2016, and the 2008 Constitution removing barriers that restricted women from running for the position of President. New laws have also been enacted including the Domestic Violence Prevention Act, the Sexual Abuse and Harassment Act, and the Sexual Offences Act. Furthermore, women play a crucial role in political party activism at grassroots level.

Despite these important developments, women's participation and leadership in decision-making institutions remains marginal, and temporary special measures, such as quotas for women in the national level legislature, as well as in local councils, are still not part of the recent amendments.



Photo: UNDP in Maldives

Most women find it very difficult to switch from street activism to elected offices, which requires **significant financial resources, political connections, and support from the members in the family.**

Other factors that limit successful participation of women in political life include **women's limited mobility, fears of negative coverage over media and cyberbullying, restrictions imposed by cultural and religious beliefs, lack of confidence in public speaking, limited networking opportunities,** as well as **lack of full day child-care.** A shift towards a more conservative interpretation of religion has resulted in women's roles in the public domain becoming increasingly restricted.

### *Political parties and their women's wings*

With the emergence of political parties in the Maldives in the early 2000s women have been playing an important role in mobilizing support for political activities, especially at the grass-roots levels, with a few women represented in the parties' higher-level decision-making structures. Women also play a critical role as key campaign leaders for male candidates at the grass-roots level, and have led very successful campaigns. However this has not cultivated the confidence for women to contest in the election themselves. It is still the case that the roles of women in political parties are limited to only specific type of roles, including street activism and door-to-door campaigning.

There is a consensus that political parties provide the most useful avenues to challenge the status quo. Political parties have an immense influence and constitute important entry points to reach masses and influence policy. Political parties further recruit and select candidates for elections, and determine a country's policy agenda. How women participate in political parties and how those parties encourage and nurture women's involvement and incorporate gender-equality issues are key determinants of women's political empowerment.

Formal and informal party rules and procedures are key factors that can influence political parties' responsiveness to gender issues. In the Maldives gender sensitivity and mainstreaming mechanisms are yet to be integrated into internal governance structures of the parties. Out of five key political parties, all except one have women represented in the council and other organs. Three out of the five reserve one post for women as a deputy leader. All parties in the Maldives have women's wings, but the role is often limited to organizing rallies and conducting campaigns and they usually perform as women-only cells. The

choice of candidates is mostly strategic to advance the parties agenda which leads to a prioritization of male candidates. Women's empowerment is considered as secondary.

### **Glass ceilings to be shattered**

*Women's limited mobility:* due to the geographic makeup of the country, one must travel extensively to keep up with a political career. Most trainings and capacity building sessions are organized in bigger settlements, thus limiting the participation of women from remote islands, who cannot afford to travel to another island, even for a short period, leaving their households behind. The same applies to women who aspire to be elected into local councils or the national parliament – if elected they must move to the capital island, or to Male', which is not always possible due to family obligations as women are considered as primary caregivers.

*Negative media coverage and cyberbullying:* women feel more targeted in media and in the society with bullying and harassment for their political ambitions. Interviewees referred to cases when their pictures were edited with the aim to publicly humiliate them.

*Influence of cultural and religious beliefs:* Cultural and religious perceptions are used as a tool to limit women to fully participate in public life. Public perceptions of "womanly behavior" do not include being politically active and speaking up on social and/or political issues.

*Lack of confidence in public speaking:* 'fear of public speaking' and lack of relevant training are serious obstacles for women to speak at rallies and protests, which hinders their voices in politics.

*Limited networking opportunities:* women have limited access to political networking unless they have family and business connections. Most political socializing takes place between men in so-called "hotas" - cafes mainly frequented by men. Women are often financially dependent on their husbands and other male family members, lacking access to employment, and therefore without adequate funding to support political campaigns.

*Lack of full day child-care:* young mothers are often excluded from participation in political life due to limited child-care services available both in Male' and islands. The existing facilities do not allow leaving a child for more than 3 hours, and appear to be quite expensive.

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*"I had to run for the elections, as there was no other way I could demonstrate to the next generation the value of our voice and true meaning of representation. I wanted to show them it was possible. They too can overcome any challenge".*

**~Suhana Adam, Chairperson, Haa Dhaalu Atoll Council**

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### **Towards no ceilings**

The barriers that undermine women's capacity to participate in public decision-making demand a multi-sectoral approach. Improvements are necessary in the clusters of internal party

### **Financing women-led political campaigns**

In the context of expanding socio-economic gaps and high levels of female unemployment (39%), the issue of financing of electoral campaigns for women candidates becomes a top obstacle for women to get elected to local councils and national parliament. None of the political parties provides targeted funding for their female candidates to ensure more outreach, including access to media. All interviewed (interviewed where?) successful candidates cited the support of their immediate families, mainly comprising of money flows into their campaigns from family-run businesses, as a major component of their achievement. Some referred to support of local businesses with printing and disseminating campaign materials. Political party functionaries stated that campaign funds, if available, are divided evenly between candidates confirmed through primaries regardless of their sex, but in majority of cases fundraising remains the candidate's sole responsibility, putting women in a more disadvantageous position.

structures to strengthen gender-sensitive language of regulations and mainstream empowerment through women's wings, as well as establishment of special funds for women candidates and voluntary internal quotas. More measures must be taken to facilitate better participation of women in the electoral processes through more coordinated financial support, transformative gender training, and building skills on public speaking and political debating.

Mentorship and shadowing programs should be introduced to promote positive gender roles in politics. Certain measures are to be undertaken to initiate changes in public perception of women in politics. Revising regulations of political parties, investing more efforts and finances into strengthening women's wings and committees within their structures, and using financial incentives by linking funding to women's representation are important to make a necessary shift in this area. Providing assistance, allocating funds for training and skills-building, and creating discussion and lobbying platforms are imperative for women to succeed in politics. Due to lack of temporary special measures, women candidates should be promoted through internal voluntary quotas or reserved seats mechanisms.

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