



Statement by Her Excellency Eva Abdulla, Member of Parliament

Republic of Maldives

Fifty-fifth Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 2011

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, and stakeholders in the movement to empower women,

The three pillars of the United Nations – peace and security, human rights and development – constitute the basis of all international work aimed at engendering a world that reflects the highest aspirations of humankind. In our common pursuit of the full realisation of the MDGs and Beijing Platform for Action, we secure the foundation essential to principal notions of freedom from want and freedom from fear. In our shared quest to eliminate violence against women and for gender equality in education and labour, we underscore the inextricable link between security, human rights, and development as the basic preconditions for peoples, nations and individuals to conduct life in larger freedom. After all, a woman living in fear cannot focus on her education; an uneducated woman cannot make informed decisions for herself, her family, or her community; and an underemployed population will always struggle for sustainable development.

Security and Peace: Progress in the elimination of violence against women and girls

Mr. Chairman,

Recent studies show that “one in three Maldivian women aged 15-49 experience physical or sexual abuse in her lifetime.¹ In response, the Maldives amended its criminal sentencing guidelines to provide more appropriate punishments for perpetrators. Additionally, our Parliament is in the final stages of establishing the Domestic Violence Bill, which for the first time will allow for the monitoring of abuse cases and publication of annual statistics. This will provide the basis for more informed policies aimed at comprehensively addressing this serious problem.

Nevertheless, Mr. Chairman, the intentions of these bills have no meaning without the proper delivery systems. The simple fact is, that we in the Maldives must do more to develop an equitable and accessible public justice system equipped with well-trained agents to bring perpetrators to justice and return security to their victims. We look forward to continue working with our partners to bring our institutional and policy capacities in line with the realities faced by our women and girls.

Human Rights: Progress in access to education and decent work

Mr Chairman,

The Maldives holds the second-highest rank on the UN Gender-related Development Index in the South Asian region.² This is underpinned by the fact that there is no institutional discrimination along gender lines in access to education, health services, or for work in the public sector. More women are enrolling in tertiary education, and this past December also marks the ratification of the National University Act, which allowed Maldives to recently open the doors of its first university on the 15th of January.

¹ E/ICEF/2010/P/L.28: UNICEF Country Programme Document for the Republic of Maldives, pg 4.

² Asian Development Bank, Strategy and Program Assessment; Maldives: Gender and Development Assessment, 2007, pg 1

However, stereotyping of women's roles in society threaten to erode our gains and erect obstacles to future progress. Household management and childcare continues to be seen as the domain of women in Maldivian society, and it is estimated that less than 4% of men contribute to household tasks and childcare.³ Thus, even where tertiary education opportunities are available, women that must juggle work, family and a household may find it too demanding to continue higher education.

Female participation in the labour force has nearly doubled over the last twenty years, but unemployment is also disproportionately high among them, and men continue to have almost twice as much presence in our labour force. This could be because men continue to dominate employment in sectors such as tourism and construction, which are some of the fastest growing employment sectors in the country. To address this, the government has undertaken the Gender Empowerment Project, in collaboration with UNDP, aimed at encouraging entrepreneurship development and business skills.

Development: Political Development

At the root of much of these problems, Mr. Chairman, is the exceedingly low-level of women in Parliament, where I am one of five female Parliamentarians. This deficit continues to buttress the barriers women face, because without the inclusion of gender perspectives, policies will continue to lack the multifaceted approaches required to address the complex social, political and economic needs of our country.

To this end, attempts have been made to increase women's political awareness through a series of measures, but much more must be done to deal with the sources of this current deficit. For example, there is increasing evidence that families are removing girls from a well-rounded education, including extra curricular activities that are meant to develop leadership skills. We believe that religious extremism that shapes negative attitudes towards women and girls forms the genesis of this devolution towards female education and empowerment. Thus, we must respond with more concerted efforts to encourage participation and mend attitudes.

Mr. Chairman,

The Maldives is fully committed to encouraging women's active engagement in leadership and decision-making at every level, and was inspired by the creation of UN Women. We anticipate meaningful engagement with this new entity and are firmly committed to our responsibility to ensure that women and girls are safe in our communities, and feel supported and encouraged to take their rightful places in our classrooms, at decision-making tables in our boardrooms, and in our government.

³ Asian Development Bank, Strategy and Program Assessment; Maldives: Gender and Development Assessment, 2007, pg 1