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**Emerging theme: Engaging young women and men, girls and boys,
to advance gender equality**

**EMERGING ISSUES, TRENDS AND NEW APPROACHES TO
ISSUES AFFECTING THE SITUATION OF
WOMEN OR EQUALITY BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN:
A POLITICAL AND LEGISLATIVE APPROACH**

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Introduction

Maldives is an island nation consisting of nearly 1190 islands grouped into 26 atolls. Out of these 1190 islands, people live in 200 islands. One of the major challenges in providing any service in the Maldives is the geographical dispersal of population where, while the population is dispersed between 200 islands, there are some islands in which only about 150 people live. The islands are governed by the island council that reports to the atoll council. The cities are governed by the city council. All the councils are monitored by the local government authority, which answers to the home ministry.

In the Maldivian context, the official definition of youth covers ages from 18 up to 35 years. But the ministry of youth has proposed an amendment to this age group to be changed to 15 to 35 years. The main reason behind this amendment is that by the time a child reaches 18 years of age, s/he has already come across several important events and experiences in life, which, if left to be dealt after 18 years of age, do not bring effective solutions. Such examples include gender awareness, awareness about domestic violence and violence against women. Therefore it is believed that, policies towards youth should include educating children at a younger age on gender based issues and social issues before they reach the age of 18 years.

According to the Maldives Statistical yearbook of 2011, 51% of the total population of Maldives, is below 25 years and 69.9% is below 35 years.

Youth and politics: opportunities and obstacles

Since the introduction of the multiparty system in Maldives, involvement of youth in politics has increased dramatically. Almost all of the political parties have women's wings consisting of all women, with an elected president, vice president and a council, and youth wings, with its own elected president, vice president and council members. This provides opportunities for women and youth to take leadership positions within the party, which acts as a platform for them to move on to national leadership positions.

In the current parliament, out of a total of 77 members, only 5 are women. While a total of 453 candidates contested in the parliament election, there were only 22 female candidates. The average age of the current parliament is 44 years, while 16 members were below 35 years of age and, the youngest member was 24 years, at the time of election. Compared to previous parliaments, the current parliament has the most number of youth recorded in the history of Maldives. This is an indication of the increase in involvement of youth in politics.

The process of decentralization has opened opportunities for both women and youth to take part in politics at a leadership level. Currently, out of a total of 1091 local council members, only 58 are women, out of which, 45 are below the age of 35 years. The political parties also faced major challenges in bringing out women to run for the local council elections. Out of 2754 candidates, there were only 222 female candidates. One of the reasons was because leadership positions within the parties and in the islands are dominated by men. In addition, the failure to introduce a quota for women, after much debate in the parliament, in the Parliament Elections Act and the Local Councils Election Act, provided further opportunities for men to dominate the elections. However, the inclusion of elected women's committees to guide the local councils at all levels, in the above Act, provides opportunities for women to take part in the

decision making process. According to the Local Governance Act, there should be an elected Women's Committee in each island, atoll and city. This is an all women's committee elected by the vote of all the women in an island, atoll or city. The number of members in the committee is the same as the number of local council members in that particular, island, atoll or city

Even with the opportunities available, it has to be noted that, due to the lack of capacity and the lack of self-confidence, a substantial number of women do not come forward to make use of these opportunities. There is an urgent need to conduct capacity building programs, especially in the islands, other than the capital. The government, NGOs, as well as political parties could focus on the elected women's committees and run programs to increase their capacity in order to build their confidence to compete in island, atoll and city council elections, as well as parliament elections.

57% of the local council members are below the age of 35 years, which means that youth involvement in policy making within the islands is going to be very high.

The easiest route for young people to actively engage in political processes, for example, getting elected into parliament or local councils, is through political parties. It has to be noted that most of the seats won in the parliament, as well as the seats won in the local council election, came through a party ticket. Because of this, it is very important to increase awareness about gender equality and the role of youth, within political parties, in order to encourage political parties to give more emphasis to women and youth, in giving party tickets to individuals for elections. NGOs that are established with the goal of promoting gender equality, as well as the government could conduct gender awareness programs specially focused towards political parties.

Another problem in Maldives is that, during the times before the multiparty system was introduced, most of the political posts were awarded by the president, and people from certain established families only got the chance to be in leadership positions. This has created a belief in people's minds that, only certain people from certain families, are good enough to compete for leadership positions. Therefore, today, even after the introduction of the party system, most people are reluctant to volunteer to run for leadership positions within the party or in national level elections. In order to overcome this obstacle, political parties need to find ways of bringing forward young enthusiastic people. To this extent, Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP) recently organized a 'Youth Leadership in Politics' workshop, where anyone between the age of 18 and 35 years could join and learn about the political system of Maldives, and how the youth could participate and contribute to the decision making process. This program was very effective because a lot of young people, who would never have been identified or singled out as people interested in politics, joined the program. 20% of the participants were young women.

The lack of available finance for youth and women is a major obstacle for them, when running for political posts, especially in the parliamentary election.

Youth influence in promoting gender equality through the legislative process and in policy making

Currently, in Maldives, there is no systematic process for young people to get involved in the legislative process. The only youth involvement in the legislative process comes from the

young parliamentarians. Most of the legislature is not written, with consideration given to gender related issues within the bill.

The lack of volunteering opportunities for the youth to get involved in the legislative process is one reason for their lack of involvement in this process. Also there are limited legislation related to gender equality and also, not enough knowledge on the implications of specific legislation on gender.

Looking at this on a more positive note, these problems have been identified and solutions are being worked upon. The importance of having a Youth Act which, governs the principles of how youth can be involved in the decision making process at a national level, and the role of youth in the development process, has been realized, and the work on a youth bill is underway.

Some of the issues being covered in this bill include: defining youth, introduction of youth committees at different levels of governance, which will take part in formulating national youth policies as well as giving their contribution to the parliament regarding legislations involving youth and also the impact of certain legislations on youth. In addition to this, the clause on youth committees, in the youth bill states that at least 30% of every youth committee at the island, atoll and city level should be women.

The bill also includes, introducing youth national awards, education and training for youth, job opportunities, housing and healthcare for youth, recreation and preventing crime among youth.

In addition to this, election of women's committees, to participate at policy level in the decision making process at island, atoll and city levels has been included in the Local Governance Act, in order to increase the participation of women.

It is also important to note that young women, in particular, face more obstacles in being active in public life than men. According to the Maldives Demographic Health Survey, 2009, the average age for first marriage among youth is 19 years and the age at first pregnancy is 20 years. 41% of the marriages in 2010 were in the age group of 20 to 24 years (Statistical Yearbook 2011). Therefore, even though there is no constitutional barrier for women to become active in public life, affirmative action needs to be taken to change the traditional, historical and cultural attitudes towards realizing the women's rights in running for public offices. This includes the establishment of childcare centers and child friendly working environments.

The role of government, private sector and civil society in involving and supporting young people in taking on leadership positions

It is important to realize that, the responsibility of involving youth and making them a part of the planning process, for the successful development of a country, does not lie on the shoulders of any one party. It is the responsibility of the government, the private sector and the civil society to help the youth to evolve into a gender sensitive, nationally responsible group of economically productive people. In Maldives, it is proudly noted that all these stakeholders do play an important role in molding the future of the youth, though there is still a long way to go, since most activities are ad hoc and all stakeholders are not in coherence with one another.

The Strategic Action Plan 2009 – 2013 talks of supporting programs to empower youth to be responsible, active citizens contributing to the national development. This also includes the establishment of the Maldives Volunteer Corps, by the Ministry of Youth in 2009, with the vision of making volunteerism part of every Maldivian's life. The government as well as NGOs working at island level, have established youth centers which provide support for youth in holding recreational activities, conducting awareness programs, career guidance programs, counseling, cyber café services, life skills programs etc.

The civil society, the private sector and donors such as the UN agencies have plans to support young people in becoming engaged in leadership posts. Some of their work include: conducting a youth parliament, leadership workshops for youth etc.

In addition to this, the youth and women's wings of political parties also provide opportunities for young people and women to gain experience and training for leadership positions. However, in order to increase gender equality, youth wings of political parties should consider having a balance in male and female members within the leadership of the wing. For example, if the president of the wing is male, the vice president should be female and vice versa. The council of the youth wing should also try to have a balanced number of male and female members.

It is also important to highlight how the Girl Guides, having been established in Maldives for 64 years and currently having 7000 members, have moved on from their traditional roots, towards being an NGO, focusing on the National Millennium Development Goals of Maldives. Their current activities relate to climate change and they will be focusing on violence against women, as their next goal.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the introduction of a modern democratic system has brought many positive changes in Maldives, especially with regard to the involvement of youth in politics. Maldives is seeing more and more youth in leadership positions now.

Since 52% of civil servants are female and nearly 37% of civil servants are under 29 years of age (Statistical yearbook 2011), the role of youth and women in civil service is definitely established. And yet, even though, by the end of 2010, 26% of the political posts in various offices were female, there were very few women in the top posts. Even now, there is only one female in the cabinet, and only 5 women in the parliament, none in the atoll or city councils and no political party with a female leader or deputy leader.

Often, during the legislative process also, it is found that the lack of cooperation from male parliament members, who are not gender sensitized, but who control majority of votes, prevents the legislation that come from the parliament being gender sensitive. My proposal to include a standing committee in the parliament to deal with women and children's issues was also rejected during the last session of parliament, because majority of the male members of the parliament felt that if there was a women's committee, there should be a men's committee too. These are issues that can be prevented in the future by increasing gender sensitivity among youth, especially young men.

Therefore, gender sensitization and gender equality in political participation, is very important in order to promote equal opportunity for everyone and, to increase the productivity of the nation. In this regard, it is important to find ways to engage young men in promoting gender equality and gender sensitization.

Recommendations

1. It is very important for political parties to give special attention to involving youth and women in order to promote gender equality. This is because a political party is able to provide a lot of experiential opportunities such as giving public speeches, actively participating in decision making, traveling and meeting people, being involved in campaigns etc.
2. Increasing gender awareness within political parties, especially at the leadership level, is also equally important.
3. Sensitizing parliaments to gender related issues is another way in which more opportunities can be provided for both women and youth through the legislative process.
4. Introduction of a Youth Act would be a beneficial step forward in defining the role of youth and encouraging them to take part in the process of development. Inclusion of a clause insisting the existence of a women's wing in each political party, in the Political Party Act, will ensure women a more active role within political parties.
5. Forming youth committees and women's committees, consisting of youth and women, who are enthusiastic to contribute to national development will ensure the participation of youth in the decision making process. These committees should be used as a platform for young women and men to move upwards to higher positions.
6. Conducting gender awareness programs in schools at an early stage in education is one way to ensure that children grow up with positive views on gender equality. In addition, having healthy discussions of current affairs in the country, at school, as children become teenagers, would get them thinking about national issues. This will rouse their interest in getting involved in policy making decisions that involve them, as they grow older.

Call for support

I plan to propose an amendment to the Parliament Elections Act and the Local Councils Elections Act, to introduce a quota for women in the parliament and local councils and in order for me to take this cause forward I call for the support of all relevant UN agencies, organizations, NGOs and stakeholders. I know that the path to get this amendment passed is not going to be easy in a parliament where we have only 5 female MPs out of 77 members.

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