

UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls

MALÉ (22 September 2022) – At the end of a 12-day mission to the Maldives, in which the expert group delegation, comprised of Melissa Upreti and Meskerem Geset Techane, held meetings in Malé, Kulhudufushi, Maafushi, Maduvaree, and Guraidhoo, the experts shared their preliminary findings.

We would like to extend our sincere appreciation to the Government of the Maldives for the invitation to undertake this official visit and for its cooperation during the visit. We would also like to thank all the interlocutors for the fruitful exchanges: public officials, representatives of civil society, health professionals, lawyers, journalists, and women and girls from different communities.

Preliminary findings: A time to bridge gender gaps and accelerate progress

Context

The Maldives has a rich cultural history where matriarchy once flourished, and women widely held positions of power in the private and public spheres. With the propagation of religious conservatism that imposed the subordination and obedience of women, societal norms, practices, and belief systems were gradually transformed.

We note that since 2008, with the adoption of a new Constitution, the Maldives has taken notable steps to advance gender equality. It has adopted several new laws and policies and established the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services. Following a period of political upheaval and a peaceful transition of power in 2018, a substantial legislative and policy reform agenda was initiated including in key areas concerning women and girls.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been substantial and felt acutely across the economy which is highly dependent on tourism. We were pleased to learn about several measures introduced by the Government to mitigate harm to women and girls, including in connection with domestic violence. As an island state, the Maldives is most vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change, which creates specific risks for women and girls. We note that the Republic takes pride in being an outspoken international leader on climate change and we see its potential to become a champion for women's rights in this area.

Despite some positive changes and in the face of immense challenges and disparities within the country, significant gender gaps remain, and additional efforts are needed to accelerate progress.

Legal, policy and institutional framework

We are pleased to note that the Maldives has ratified seven core human rights treaties and the Paris Agreement. It has shown strong engagement with United Nations Treaty Bodies, the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and Special Procedures. The creation of the National Mechanism for Reporting and Follow-Up to implement recommendations adopted by international human rights mechanisms is a positive step. Several indicators from the Sustainable Development Goals have been integrated into national policies such as the National Gender Equality Action Plan (NGEAP) 2022-2026.

However, we are concerned about the reservations to certain provisions of Article 16 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women concerning equality in marriage and family relations, on grounds of incompatibility with Sharia. It is not acceptable under international human rights law for any religious doctrine to be used as a basis for discrimination against women and girls or to fail to prevent it.

We note that the 2008 Constitution provides that rights and freedoms are guaranteed to all persons in a manner that is not contrary to any tenet of Islam, without discrimination, including on the basis of sex. We welcome the enactment of the Gender Equality Act in 2016 which defines and prohibits direct and indirect gender-based discrimination. It outlines the duties and responsibilities of State institutions to achieve gender equality and provides a good conceptual framework. The multi-year National Gender Equality Action Plan is a practical roadmap for advancing gender equality with the involvement of other ministries, which should contribute to mainstreaming gender equality as a priority across government. The plan calls for gender responsive budgeting by at least three ministries by 2026. We are pleased to note that the Ministry of Finance has already adopted gender budgeting in its work plan.

We welcome the important work of the National Human Rights Commission, whose priorities include promoting women's rights and gender equality. We call on the Government to ensure it has adequate human, technical and financial resources to fulfil its mandate and guarantee its independence as per the Principles relating to the Status of National Institutions (the Paris Principles) without any risk of reprisal for its work.

We welcome the census that is currently being carried out. We are pleased to hear that for the first time it captures the socio-economic indicators which will provide useful data to develop future policies in many areas where women and girls experience gender-based discrimination.

Public and political life

Women have a right to fully participate in all aspects of public and political life. We welcome the removal of a specific provision in the Constitution prohibiting women from running for the presidency. The 2019 amendment to the Decentralization Act established a 33 per cent electoral quota for women in local councils. However, we are concerned about the practice by some political parties that limit women to run only for quota seats.

Additionally, numerous challenges were revealed by interlocutors stemming from pervasive gender stereotyping combined with the burden of care responsibilities and absence of training opportunities to build the leadership skills of women councilors and candidates. According to interlocutors, women local council members are either relegated to administrative roles and marginalized from policy discussions and decision-making, or their inputs are not taken seriously.

We welcome the establishment of a legal framework for Women Development Committees (WDCs) under the Decentralization Act with a strong mandate to promote women's political participation at the local level. However, only five per cent of the local council's budget is allocated to a WDC and requests for funds must be approved by the local council, which creates an additional administrative burden for the WDCs and results in their lack of autonomy. Additionally, we learned that there are limited efforts to engage WDC members meaningfully in decision-making. Their contributions are frequently not only undervalued, but they are often given gender stereotypical roles such as cooking and cleaning. In some places the lack of cooperation and coordination with the local councils significantly hinders their work. We were informed about the high number of resignations from these posts although for a few, a WDC has provided legitimacy and empowerment signaling some positive impact. Further the allowance for WDC members is minimal, which is a major disincentive for WDC members who often put in many

hours and see their work as being important to their constituents while also being accountable as elected leaders.

Structural barriers to women's participation and stereotypical attitudes are also evident in women's political participation at the national level. Six out of 17 ministries are headed by women and only four out of 87 seats in the Parliament are held by women, which is very low. Prevailing negative social and cultural norms about women's roles in society are frequently employed to undermine women's political participation and can lead to them becoming targets of gendered verbal abuse, both online and offline, harassment, hate speech, political intimidation, and disinformation campaigns aimed at silencing them. Certain conservative narratives question women's competence to participate in public life and limit women's role only to serving the family and procreation. As noted by interlocutors, there are limited safeguards against the risks and reprisals that women political leaders face which are not properly addressed.

We applaud the Government for achieving gender parity in the foreign service and in the civil service. Since 2019, two women judges out of seven judges are serving at the Supreme Court. However, we note that out of the 134 magistrates, only seven are women and merely three women judges preside over the lower and appellate courts. Across the judiciary only 20 out of 183 judges, i.e. 11 per cent are women. Notable efforts are being made in the police force to increase women's participation which is crucial for the public good.

We are deeply concerned about the shrinking civic space and organized efforts to undermine women's participation in democracy as illustrated by many instances of hostility towards a range of women who publicly challenge stereotypical gender norms, including women human rights defenders and journalists. As expressed by one interlocutor, "Democracy, human rights, good governance work is deemed irreligious." We note with concern that they face misogynistic and sexist attacks often amplified through social media. Investigations into reprisals are not routinely and speedily conducted and there is a general environment of impunity.

Economic participation

Women's economic participation and empowerment is crucial to their ability to enjoy the full range of human rights and freedoms. We note that women's access to economic resources has improved in the Maldives. We are pleased to learn about the Government's scheme of low interest loans to establish Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) that facilitate women's access to financial capital, with 40 per cent of the funds being allocated to promote their entrepreneurship.

However, there is a gender gap in women's participation in the labour force which is 42.2 per cent compared to 75.1 per cent for men. This gap reflects structural discrimination, including the persistence of gender stereotypes and gendered expectations, norms and attitudes, which remain a significant barrier to ensure women's equal economic participation. Certain sectors are highly feminized, for example 84 per cent of home-based workers are women. We note a higher percentage of women in the informal sector, with 25 per cent women versus 16 per cent men, where proper social and labour protections are lacking in comparison to the formal sector.

We also note that women bear disproportionate burden of unpaid care and household work, posing a significant barrier to women's equal participation in the economic sector. Moreover, the lack of child care and elderly care facilities limit women's time to engage in paid work. According to data from 2016,

women spend an average of six hours per day on household chores, including unpaid care work for their family members while men spend half that amount per day.

Although parity has been achieved in a few employment sectors, including in the civil and foreign services, a key concern is women's concentration in lower-level jobs and limited opportunities for career progression. Further, every worker has the right to equal pay for work of equal value. According to our interlocutors, women workers are frequently being denied this right based on negative assumptions about their competence. Thus, a major concern is the gender pay gap, as reflected in the average monthly salary of MVR 11,977 (775.5 USD) for men compared to MVR 7,510 (486 USD) for women. The Covid-19 pandemic has further deepened gender inequality in economic sector. More women were forced to leave the work force or take a prolonged absence. 5.1 per cent of women versus 1.8 per cent of men were impacted by pandemic.

We welcome the recent introduction of a minimum wage, a pension scheme, the extension of paid maternity leave to six months and paid paternity leave to one month for public sector employees, and unemployment benefits. However, we regret to observe that access to such benefits has not been expanded to all sectors, private as well as informal employment, including for migrant workers. The systematic disadvantages faced by women in employment throughout their careers translates into lower savings and pensions which is a source of economic insecurity for many and increases their economic dependence.

We are pleased to learn about the Sexual Abuse and Harassment Prevention Act of 2014 that aims to ensure a violence free work environment. However, according to interlocutors, sexual harassment against women in the workplace is common, complaints are not taken seriously, and redress for victims remains elusive. This contributes to a hostile work environment, undermines workplace safety and security for women and hinders their participation in workforce. We would like to draw attention to the ILO Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment Convention defines the world of work broadly and provides guidance to address these concerns.

It is estimated that women account for about 10 per cent of the approximately 180,000 migrant workers in the Maldives who are an important part of the country's labour force, mainly in tourism and domestic work. While we note that only three per cent of migrants working in tourism are women, it is alarming that migrants do not enjoy the same labour rights available for Maldivian workers as per international standards, such as the standard for daily working hours, paid leave and sick leave provisions, as well as the special protection needs of migrant domestic workers. Moreover, the lack of a minimum wage for migrant workers should be tackled to ensure protection for women workers, who may otherwise be exploited. We also note that a significant number of migrant workers in the Maldives are irregular and working in the informal sector, which makes them unwilling to report incidents of labour violations or violence to authorities.

The introduction of a social housing program offering women equitable access to housing irrespective of their marital and social status is commendable and benefits disadvantaged groups like female headed households and single mothers. However, data shows that less than a third of women in the Maldives own land due to inequitable inheritance practice and preferences for male property ownership stemming from provision in the Family Law. We commend the Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure for introducing a joint title deed system for married couples and the removal of marital status as an eligibility criterion for land title applications. We also commend the Ministry's decision to allocate some units as shelters for survivors of domestic violence.

Access to Education

Education has a vital role in empowering women and girls. We note, Maldives has made significant strides in enhancing educational attainments. We applaud the constitutional guarantee for free primary and secondary education.

Further, access to free education in public institutions at all levels has been strengthened through the adoption of the Education Act in 2020 and of the Higher Education Act in 2021. We are pleased to learn that women and girls have equal access and can benefit from loan and scholarship schemes, including greater access to specialized education as well as overseas studies. While these measures have contributed to higher graduation rates for women in comparison to men, we note with regret that girls are underrepresented in the fields of science and technology. Regrettably the gains in education have not yet been translated into greater equality in socio-economic opportunities.

While there was a notable presence of female teachers, and very good facilities in schools we visited, adequate public budget must be allocated to support the educational advancement of women and girls on the islands, in particular to increase their access to technical and vocational training, and entry into male dominated fields of education and career paths.

We note with concern that between 2017 and 2019, 21 pregnant schoolgirls dropped out of school. This is a considerable disadvantage that women and girls face. It does not only have a negative impact on girls' education, and their socio-economic opportunities, but also far-reaching consequences in a cultural and legal context where out-of-wedlock pregnancy is criminalised and stigmatised.

We regret to learn that comprehensive sexuality education is not part of the formal curriculum, although certain aspects are integrated into different subjects. It is necessary to equip teachers to promote a comprehensive understanding of reproductive and sexual health matters.

We are pleased to see a constitutional commitment to foster respect for human rights through education. However, we regret to note that human rights and gender studies are not part of the official curriculum, but we welcome the creation of human rights clubs in some schools with the support of the National Human Rights Commission.

Access to quality health-care services

We were pleased to learn that the Government has established a universal health coverage scheme in 2014, called *Husnuvaa Aasandha* providing free healthcare for Maldivian nationals. However, health care access for migrant women and for those with special needs remains a challenge.

According to the information received, women residing in the outer islands are more vulnerable to poor health outcomes as they are more susceptible to health-related problems such as anemia exacerbated by a high prevalence of thalassemia and undernourishment and these conditions are often worsened due to a lack of information and food insecurity and lack of access to adequate health care. We welcome improvements in island connectivity leading to better access to healthcare for women led by the Ministry of Transportation.

A predominant health concern for women that remains largely neglected relates to their mental health and there is a huge gap in services for women at all stages of their life cycle. We were pleased to see that the general conditions in the facilities that we visited were of very good standard and there was a notable presence of female health service providers. In one regional hospital, efforts to expand a women's wellness centre that will increase access to preventative care including cancer screenings is underway with donor support which is positive step considering that cervical cancer is one of the most

common cancers among women in the Maldives. We welcome that the Ministry of Health has launched a national programme for reproductive health and has a dedicated national strategy developed with the involvement of non-governmental organizations, among others and aligns with the relevant SDG targets.

Although the Ministry of Health has a robust budget, its main challenge is to manage the cost per capita due to the island structure of the Maldives. It is evident that smaller facilities in the islands are struggling to provide a suitable level of care mainly due to lack of funding, despite the needs in their communities.

According to the Demographic and Health Survey from 2016-2017, 99 per cent of women in the Maldives receive antenatal care which is impressive. We are pleased to learn about the decline in maternal mortality. However, the unique geography and the widely dispersed population of the Maldives continues to impose certain logistical challenges for cases involving referrals. Interlocutors noted that those living outside of Malé face significant out-of-pocket costs due to travel and accommodation which imposes a financial burden. We also note with deep concern the high rate of caesarean sections, which are not always medically necessary. Between January and December 2018, 52 per cent of pregnant women had a caesarean section, while only 22 per cent had a normal birth.¹

We regret to learn that family planning services and contraception is only offered to married couples and, in practice, spousal consent is often sought by health service providers. Although married couples are allowed to use methods of family planning, the unmet need is 31 per cent and only 14.9 per cent of married women use any modern contraceptive method, which is very low. We are deeply concerned about the limited availability of contraceptive information and services for adolescents, despite the National Family Planning Guidelines that permit access to services irrespective of marital status.

We note with concern the penal provisions that make abortion a felony. As per international human rights law, abortion must not be criminalized.² While a fatwa ruling has been issued in 2013 clarifying the grounds and time limits for abortion from an Islamic perspective, there is a general lack of information about safe abortions and there are reports of unsafe abortion practices and women and girls being forced to travel overseas to obtain services. Abortion is essential health care. Women and girls have the right to access abortion services, including on request.

While drug use is a major public health concern, it is not adequately reflected in policy. We also note the presence of only one rehabilitation centre. There is as a lack of women specific programmes as well as a strong focus on a punitive approach as opposed to a harm reduction approach. We are concerned that female drug users are denied access to specialized rehabilitation programs despite the increasing vulnerability of young women to drug abuse.

Climate change, environment and development practices

We welcome the Climate Change Policy Framework, however, it appears to be lacking a gender perspective. We are concerned about the heightened risks faced by women and girls across the islands due to climate change, environmental degradation and their lack of participation in decisions concerning the development of infrastructure. We learned from interlocutors how these have contributed to precarious environmental conditions leading to poor health outcomes, food insecurity, a higher burden

¹ The World Health Organization, [WHO recommendations non-clinical interventions to reduce unnecessary caesarean sections](#) (2018)

² See the WGDWAG report on [Women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health rights in crisis \(A/HRC/47/38\)](#), and report on health and safety (A/HRC/32/44)

of care work and the loss of livelihoods for women. Interlocutors reported hardships including disruptions in food supplies, as well as drinking water and sanitation several times each year associated with frequent flooding, which is aggravated by the destruction of their natural habitat. Disaster responses appear to focus mainly on *ad hoc* mitigation activities and not adequately on prevention. We encourage mainstreaming of a strong gender component in disaster responses, considering that women and girls are disproportionately impacted by disasters.

We are also concerned that development projects for infrastructure and tourism, while much needed, are being implemented without gender impact assessments of natural resource management and without in-depth consultation with local communities, specifically women whose livelihoods are affected. Interlocutors described how the reclamation of islands and lagoons is affecting the fisheries industry, contributing to a loss of economic opportunities and threatening indigenous practices and handicrafts in which women are primarily engaged while creating new environmental risks.

Family and culture

In the Maldives, like in most countries around the globe, there is a discriminatory cultural construction of gender. The failure to ensure the equality of women and girls within the family undermines any attempt to ensure their equality in all areas of society.

The Family Act allows for both men and women to commence divorce proceedings. However, additional requirements for women seeking divorce, which are not imposed on men, commonly lead to major delays in the judicial process which effectively deny women their rights. We are concerned about the emphasis on mediation once the application is received from a woman.

Similarly, there are major delays in the disbursement of alimony and child support payments because of these having to go through multiple ministries and departments. There is currently no legal provision guaranteeing an equitable division of matrimonial assets between spouses after divorce. Assets may be distributed under the terms of a prenuptial agreement but apparently this mechanism is not widely known, practiced, or encouraged.

We are deeply concerned that consensual sexual relations outside marriage are criminalized under the Penal Code and Sexual Offences Act. Such provisions often seem gender neutral, but they are overwhelmingly directed against women and girls. Moreover, the punishment for this is flogging. While enforcement of this punishment is not reported frequently, it does constitute a form of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

Further as reported by interlocutors, the prohibition has not stopped individuals from engaging in sexual activities outside marriage but rather contributed to women and girls who become pregnant being prosecuted for pregnancies outside of wedlock or forced into marriage, including minors, which is a profound concern as it is blatantly discriminatory. Similarly, we are concerned that polygamy remains legal although it has been recognized as a harmful practice that is discriminatory towards women under international human rights law.³ These issues must be urgently addressed through legal reform.

We are deeply concerned that, in addition to a number of legal provisions that embody discriminatory gender stereotypes which are aimed at keeping women in a subordinate position, there are persistent

³ Joint general recommendation/general comment No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on harmful practices, [CEDAW/C/GC/31/CRC/C/GC/18](#); UN WGDAW, thematic analysis: eliminating discrimination against women in cultural and family life, with a focus on the family as a cultural space, [A/HRC/29/40](#) (2015).

attempts by certain influential social and political actors to reinforce such stereotypes and regulate all aspects of women's and girls' lives, ranging from how they dress and behave to what they learn in school. This is being done by instrumentalizing a very specific and narrow interpretation of Islamic religious doctrine that we are told is not historically in line with Maldivian culture and religious practices.

We also note that the Government is aware of the active propagation of a fundamentalist ideology that is harmful to women but has not yet adopted a clear strategy to combat this trend. While freedom of religion or belief must be protected as a human right, we are deeply concerned about the challenges that women and girls in the Maldives face to achieving substantive gender equality due to the political misuse and misinterpretation of religious precepts by those who present themselves as scholars and employ tactics of intimidation and fear to impose their own beliefs on society regarding women's conduct and roles, both within the family and in the public realm. Many interlocutors pointed out that such actors frequently resort to allegations of "irreligiosity" and apostasy, which is a punishable offence, to silence those who disagree with their views.

Further, the rise of fundamentalism has resulted in the gradual exclusion of women from religious spaces, which violates their right to freedom of religion.

We are strongly encouraged by the inclusion of a dedicated policy goal and specific targets in the National Gender Equality Action Plan to "ensure the personal security of Maldivian women in the home and to reduce violence against women, men and children," through a series of strategies in partnership with other ministries, local councils, civil society organizations and UN agencies.

Gender-based violence

Data indicates that 1 in 3 women in the Maldives experience some form of violence in their lifetime. We recognize the important strides made in tackling many forms of gender-based violence and the strong policy commitments. In particular, we welcome the passage of the Domestic Violence Prevention Act in 2012 and the establishment of the Family Protection Authority. However, we heard repeatedly from interlocutors about many practical challenges to the effective implementation of legal protections and remedies stemming from the inadequate allocation of human, technical and financial resources to authorities, which it appears, is expected to respond in every case involving gender-based violence.

We are alarmed by lack of explicit criminalization of domestic violence under criminal law. We are also deeply concerned about reports of overcrowded housing arrangements that contribute to the prevalence of domestic violence and the impact of the exposure of young children to such acts.

We also welcome the establishment of special police and prosecution units to handle cases of gender-based violence and community outreach through neighbourhood watch programmes. To strengthen its response to gender-based violence, the Government should introduce a robust legislative framework adopting the principles of the Istanbul Convention, the most comprehensive global instrument on gender-based violence. This should include measures to: raise awareness, establish accessible complaints mechanisms for reporting, including hotlines, create sufficient shelters for survivors and ensure that complaints are duly investigated, and perpetrators are prosecuted.

We commend the Government for the passage of the First Amendment to the Sexual Offences Act in 2021, which removed certain discriminatory evidentiary requirements for proving rape, criminalised marital rape in all circumstances, made the use of rape kits mandatory for collecting evidence and adopted victim-centered, trauma-informed approaches for investigating cases of rape. Despite these progressive amendments, the laws relating to sexual violence have certain gaps which enable impunity for perpetrators. For example, the Sexual Offences Act still prescribes burdensome evidentiary

requirements to prove offences of sexual violence against women, which often makes it difficult to obtain convictions. Many of the types of evidence listed are discriminatory and based on gender stereotypes which often deter women and girls from reporting cases of sexual violence for fear of failing to meet the requirements. We heard from interlocutors that initial reports are often retracted.

Impunity for perpetrators of sexual abuse is a leading cause of the lack of use of these laws. For instance, between 2015 – 2019, 364 cases of sexual abuse were reported, out of which only 49 cases have been prosecuted to date. We are also concerned about reports of the lack of protection for women who report rape, the fear of re-victimisation and retaliation, the lack of female police investigators and social workers, inadequate shelters for victims of violence, and the lack of legal aid and support services particularly outside of Malé.

We commend the Government's adoption of the Child Rights Protection Act in 2019 which marks significant changes in the legal protection of children and prohibits child marriage. We note with deep concern reports of the continued prevalence of child marriages, which is a harmful practice with devastating consequences. In some cases, girls are forced to get married as a consequence of teenage pregnancy, which is often linked to a fear of prosecution, and under the influence of religious fundamentalism. Although the official number of child marriages has declined, we received information from several interlocutors about unregistered child marriages being officiated by clerics.

DHS data indicates that 13 per cent of women aged 15-49 have been subjected to female genital mutilation (FGM) in the Maldives mainly in the form of circumcision. Although there has been a decline in the incidence of the practice among younger educated girls, due to an effective public health intervention, we are deeply concerned about reports from interlocutors about attempts by fundamentalists to revive as a religious requirement this harmful practice, which is an unacceptable form of gender-based violence putting the health and the life of girls at risk. FGM must be explicitly prohibited by criminal law and accompanied by a sustained strategy from the Government involving all concerned stakeholders.

Access to Justice

We welcome the prioritization of access to justice, redress and effective remedies for the women and girls in the GEAP, including specific indicators to increase the percentage of women judges, and cases of gender-based violence reported and prosecuted.

We are deeply concerned about the serious barriers faced by women in their efforts to seek justice, including remedies for gender-based violence and in accessing family courts. There is a general lack of awareness of the laws. Several stakeholders reported that there is a considerable lack of adequately resourced police stations. Legal services are mostly located in Malé, often leaving women from the islands without legal assistance. Women from the islands seeking recourse face significant financial burdens when accessing courts in Malé city and, too often in civil matters, women do not have any legal representation.

Women suspected or accused of crimes also face barriers due to the lack of female lawyers, female judges and female police officers, which often compromises their right to a fair trial and safety during investigations.

While online trials introduced during Covid-19 have continued and facilitate greater access and transparency, it is worrisome that women have limited trust and confidence in the judiciary, due to a range of structural barriers and pervasive gender stereotypes. These include re-victimization, high evidentiary burdens, victim-blaming, limited enforcement of protection orders, impunity for perpetrators in cases of gender-based violence, lack of confidentiality and lengthy judicial proceedings.

Women deprived of liberty

During our visit to Maafushi prison, the only prison facility for women in the country, we observed that several women, including foreign nationals, were serving sentences or were in pre-trial detention for drug abuse and drug trafficking. We are concerned about the lack of appropriate rehabilitation services, including counselling and skill-development programmes. While we welcome efforts to provide basic services, including menstrual hygiene products and health care, and the introduction of video conferencing with family members since the COVID-19 pandemic, we note with concern the lack of sufficient time for family calls, and inadequate access to lawyers and specialist doctors. Moreover, we are deeply concerned that foreign women prisoners do not have adequate access to interpreters, lawyers, their family and embassy contacts. They are forced to undergo prolonged pre-trial detention without knowing the status of their proceedings.

We commend the adoption of prison protocols for the treatment of women prisoners but note the challenge to their proper enforcement. The gap in adequately trained female officers and lack of sensitization of prison personnel about the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules) remains a concern.

Conclusion

The Maldives is at a tipping point as a fragile democracy in the face of rising religious fundamentalism that is holding back women and girls and impeding the achievement of gender equality. If the Maldives is to develop and prosper as a nation, it must harness the potential of women and girls rather than bound them by societal perceptions and rules that relegate them to subordinate roles. They have a right to be free and to be heard, to live with dignity and enjoy their human rights without fear. Above all, they are entitled to be equal partners in development and to contribute to the Maldives' future through active participation in all spheres of life.

We have great hope as the Maldives Government has already expressed a strong commitment to gender equality in law and policy. What is urgently needed is the full and speedy implementation and resourcing of these laws and policies combined with a counter narrative that elevates women and girls as equal citizens and bearers of human rights. In addition to prioritizing the elimination of all forms of gender-based violence and harassment of women, by State and non-State actors, and dramatically improving their access to justice, the Government must expand its efforts to address the root causes and drivers of sex and gender-based discrimination, which include belief systems that deem women as inferior and practices that deny their autonomy and agency.

We are optimistic that the Maldives Government will take the necessary steps to bridge the gaps in gender equality and to accelerate progress and we stand firm in our commitment to support its efforts.

END

The [UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls](#) was created by the Human Rights Council in 2010 to intensify efforts to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and girls throughout the world in collaboration with all concerned stakeholders.

The Working Group is composed of five independent experts: Melissa Upreti (Nepal) Chairperson, Meskerem Geset Techane (Ethiopia), Elizabeth Broderick (Australia), Dorothy Estrada-Tanck (Mexico), and Ivana Radačić (Croatia).