

Gender equality and gender-sensitive parliaments as drivers of change for a more resilient and peaceful world

The road to attaining gender-equality often feels like one step forward, and two steps back. It has never felt more so than over the past couple of years. The ravages of Covid for all of us, the threats to women's reproductive rights, the threats to women's right to education Afghanistan, the effects of religious extremism in the Sahel, and in my own country and elsewhere, environmental degradation in Pakistan and elsewhere, war in Ukraine and armed conflict elsewhere, have had very direct, very negative impacts on the lives of women. It is now well- documented that gender-disparities and inequality, and violence increases in times of distress. Women become more vulnerable during times of general vulnerability, and the past couple of years have certainly been a time of vulnerability and distress.

It is our role as Parliamentarians and policy- makers and leaders of our communities and state to ensure that the fall- out from these crises are mitigated. To be better prepared, but also to correct the course as urgently and as effectively as we can.

Before I continue, let me thank the IPU, the people, and the Parliament of Rwanda.

The topic for this assembly's general debate is one that is vital, and certainly vital to the Parliament of the Maldives, the People's Majlis, and a question that we try and address every day in our work.

As we mark the anniversary of the action plan, we must start by looking at and acknowledging the progress made thus far. As the legislative branch of the state, we have tried to offer legal and financial backing to gender equality policies.

- 1) Over the last decade, the Maldives Parliament has enacted the Domestic Violence Prevention Act, the Gender Equality Law, the Prevention of Gender-Based Harassment and Violence Act, and the Gender Crimes Act.

- 2) Over the last 3 years of this Parliament, we have systematically increased the budget allocated for the Ministry of Gender, Family, including for family and children's centres, for single parents, for orphanages and for victims of domestic violence.
- 3) We passed a milestone Child Rights Protection Act, with significant changes in the legal protection of children, and establishing a special Ombudsperson for the protection of child rights.
- 4) We have revised the Criminal Procedures Act to include rape and sexual offenses as a grave criminal offense.
- 5) We amended the Local Councils Act to allocate 33% of council seats for women.
- 6) For the first time, we have put women to the Supreme Court
- 7) Mindful of the increased burden on the care workers during the pandemic, we have approved and implemented a non-practicing allowance for social workers in Gender Ministry.
- 8) Maternity leave in the Maldives has been increased to 6 months with full pay.
- 9) The Maldives Parliament constituted a standing Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and Gender constituted for the first time. The Committee has done extensive work on issues that have hitherto been largely ignored. This includes:
 - a. Addressing issues of sexual abuse submitted by private individuals, including domestic violence cases
 - b. Child abuse cases
 - c. Sexual abuse in schools
- 10) We have conducted Parliamentary inquiry into systemic gender discrimination.
- 11) The Maldives Parliament, over the last 3 years, in partnership with UNDP Maldives, have also conducted a number of Practice Parliament workshops for Women.

We have done much. Yet, certainly for the Maldives, there is still a long way to go, as evidenced by the very real and apparent gender gaps in our society. These inequalities and these threats take different forms - from child abuse to domestic violence, to rape to other forms of physical violence and deprivations to unequal opportunities in social, economic and political life.

Women lack appropriate representation in the political sphere; only 4 women in the People's Majlis are women, and the election cycles of the past decades shows the number of women seeking public office is decreasing in both numbers and percentages.

Nearly all leadership positions in political parties are held by men. Women are an active force in Maldivian political activism; and yet this is not then translated to holding office, come election time.

There is a significant gender gap in women's participation in the labor force.

Religious extremism and related rhetoric are on the rise in the Maldives. We all know the serious impacts on the rights of women and girls that religious extremism has.

Even a quick glance at Maldives' social and mass media would show insupportable misogyny and sexism; and I might even go as far as to say it feels like society is becoming perceptibly and anecdotally more intolerant to women, than increasingly tolerant.

The pandemic exposed alarming trends and made more acute existing problems of domestic violence, psychological, verbal and physical abuse experience by women inside their homes.

Clearly, significant work needs to be done to address the underlying socio-economic and political inequalities faced by women in the Maldives.

Current worldwide trends, ongoing conflicts, as well as the aftermath of the pandemic suggests we are likely to see setbacks in gender equality and in the protection of the rights of women and the girl child. And while this strains our budgets and our human and non-human resources further, our responses need to become fiercer and more urgent. And for that, Parliaments have a meaningful role to play, and we must all commit to, and continue to commit ourselves every day. As 1 of 4 women in the Parliament, and as Deputy Speaker, I am very mindful of the extra responsibility; we look to the Parliament of Rwanda for hope and inspiration.

Thank you,