**3rd Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review**

**36th Session of the UPR Working Group** - **Review of Maldives**

**Intervention on Protection of Vulnerable Groups by**

**Her Excellency Aishath Mohamed Didi
Minister of Gender, Family and Social Services**

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**Madam President, Distinguished Members of the UPR Working Group and Esteemed Delegates,**

Maldives recognises the State’s unequivocal obligation to ensure equity and equal platforms to enable equal participation of all people in the society. Despite persistent challenges, Maldives remains resolute in its efforts to ensure the protection and empowerment of women, children and persons with disabilities.

Maldives is proud to present the remarkable progress we have made in this area.

Under President Solih’s leadership, our Government’s unified vision for the Maldivian social sector is captured in our Strategic Action Plan.

The Maldives enacted the Gender Equality Act in 2016. This Act penalizes all ideas and practices facilitating gender-based discrimination. The Act provides an avenue of redress and accountability by mandating establishment of complaints mechanisms in all government institutions.

Gender Equality Policy was endorsed in 2019, and will be complemented by the Gender Equality Action Plan which is currently under development. The Gender Equality Policy and the Action Plan will enable coherency in the implementation of policies to enhance the role of women in the society.

With the Amendments to the Decentralization Act, electoral quotas for women have been introduced for the first time in Maldives in 2019, allocating 33 percent of the local council seats to women. This momentous achievement will result in at least 384 women being elected to the local councils across Maldives, to actively participate in the affairs of local governance.

This legislative amendment also affords legal recognition to Women’s Development Committees, a major partner in community development. The Act demarcates responsibilities and powers of the Women’s Development Committees, and apportions a specific budget, enhancing the Committees’ fiscal independence and allowing women a greater say in local development plans.

Maldives is committed to reducing gender disparity at key decision-making levels of the State. President Solih’s appointment of the first female Justices to the Supreme Court of Maldives is testament to our commitment.

Currently, 35 percent of our cabinet of ministers, more than 20 percent of the appointed State ministers and 63 percent of our civil service comprise of women. 22.3 percent of the women hold managerial positions. The Maldivian foreign service set a worthy example by achieving gender parity among the heads of missions. In the education sector today, girls outnumber boys in tertiary education by around 10 percent.

Even though, representation of women in the parliament currently stands at a mere 4.6 percent, the Government envisages an introduction of mandatory electoral quotas for political party primaries to encourage and facilitate women participation.

We aim to establish affordable and well regulated daycare services to support working mothers, and conduct programmes to raise awareness on shared parental responsibilities. We have already introduced a six month maternity leave and a month of paternity leave for working parents.

Specifically to mitigate the economic impact of COVID-19 on women, our focus is on building the fiscal strength of women entrepreneurs and workers. This will be effected by way of targeted loan programmess, improved access to loans for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, and through strengthened gateways for online payment and remittances to facilitate home businesses. Our Government is also committed to improving internet-based work systems to increase opportunities for women who wish to continue working from home.

**Madam President,**

Elimination of violence against women and girls is a pivotal aspect, at the very core of women empowerment.

We remain steadfast in our battle to end all forms of violence against women and girls. In fact our primary goal in this area is to assess, review and improve the implementation of the Domestic Violence Prevention Act to increase awareness and strengthen institutional response to gender-based violence.

In July 2020, we launched a nation-wide campaign against domestic violence, with the objective of raising awareness amongst men, to mobilize their participation in disseminating this message. We will also be investing in the construction of shelter homes across the Maldives, strengthening the helpline, and in establishing emergency funds for victims and survivors. We are also developing training manuals and reference materials for judges to sensitize the judiciary on gender-based violence.

Maldives also endeavours to undertake an assessment of the legislation related to sexual harassment, integrate gender mainstreaming into our civil service induction program, and implement measures to strengthen the health sector response to gender-based violence.

The COVID-19 pandemic and consequent quarantine measures rendered women even more vulnerable to domestic violence, and we realised the need for amplified efforts in this area. During the pandemic Maldives adopted a pre-emptive approach to counter the drastic increase in reported cases. All stakeholders collaborated in devising contingency and emergency response plans to establish an efficient response mechanism.

Finally, Maldives remains a committed party to CEDAW, and I am particularly pleased to note that the Maldives has now officially withdrawn its reservations to a number of paragraphs in Article 16 of the Convention.

**Madam President,**

Enactment of the Child Rights Protection Act in November 2019, signifies a paradigm shift in the area of child rights protection for Maldives. The new Act came into force in February 2020, superseding the 1991 Act which was formulated almost 28 years ago.

The Act explicitly recognises the rights of children to be protected from discrimination, exploitation, all forms of abuse in all settings, and the right to be protected from all traditional and cultural practices affecting their wellbeing. The Act reinforces every child’s right to be registered at birth, right to necessary vaccinations and adequate healthcare.

Most importantly, the Act prohibits infliction of death penalty against minors, recognises the legal age for marriage as 18 years, and sets the age for criminal responsibility for 15 years.

Right to education is reaffirmed in this Act, as well as the Education Bill and Higher Education Bill that have been submitted to the Parliament.

The geographical nature of our country poses unsurmountable challenges to the child rights protection system. We hope to resolve this gap by mobilizing community social groups and allocating child protection functions to local councils, essentially moving away from centralized service provision.

Maldives aspires to roll-out a comprehensive National Child Protection Policy encompassing child friendly versions of the law and programmes specifically tailored to empower parents. To counter the need for human capital, efforts are underway to devise a sector wide human resource plan for a specialised social sector workforce.

Following commencement of the Child Rights Protection Act, for the first time, a Children’s Ombudsperson will be overseeing the enforcement of the child rights protection mechanism in Maldives. President Solih in February this year, also established a Presidential Commission to conduct inquiries into systemic violations of child rights.

We are also working to improve the conditions of children’s shelter homes, and enhance the services available to children under State care. During this year, we have established and commenced work on a mechanism, that will allow children under State care to be reintegrated back into a family environment. Discussions are currently ongoing to strengthen the State support towards foster families and single parents.

In addition to these developments, I am also pleased to note that Maldives is now a party to all three Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The prevalence of juvenile delinquency is a pressing concern for the Government, that will be addressed through the newly enacted Juvenile Justice Act. This Act emphasizes rehabilitation and reintegration of children in conflict with the law, while preventing them from being assimilated into the regular criminal justice system.

One of the important components in this regard, is the introduction of diversion mechanisms and specific interventions directed towards at-risk youth and children.

Plans are underway to develop standard operating procedures, manuals and training guidelines for actors in the juvenile justice system, to ensure holistic implementation of the Act.

The Juvenile Justice Act lays out express provisions against detention of minors except as a last resort, recognising the best interest of the child.

Once the Act comes into force on 20th November, all cases relating to minors offending the law will be heard in specialised divisions of the Juvenile Court, in child-friendly settings, by specially trained judges.

**Madam President,**

An inclusive society is undoubtedly the key to sustainable development. Maldives recognises the need to formulate and implement stronger policies to ensure that persons with disabilities have an equal platform for participation.

Our Government continues to assist PWDs in attaining employment, education and training opportunities. To facilitate PWDs participation in sports, Maldives has opened its first ever Paralympic and Special Olympic Office. Government has also established a special department within the Ministry of Education, to oversee and implement policies on inclusive education. Government is also committed to ensuring universal accessibility to school buildings, public transport, roads, and other communal spaces.

It is a key commitment of the Government to ensure better implementation of the Act on Protection and Financial Assistance to Persons with Disabilities, and enhance the functions of the Disability Council.

Most importantly, we intend to undertake a review of the entire social protection scheme to assess the sufficiency of allowances and assistance given to PWDs and others at risk.

Plans are underway to devise a National Register of PWDs and adopt a Disabilities Classification Guideline. These instruments will significantly improve the State’s knowledge on the current status of PWDs in Maldives.

Further, the Government gives equal priority for the wellbeing of the elderly population. To ensure their rights are protected and accessibility for services are addressed, we are working on an Elderly Law and establishment of Elderly Residential Homes across the country.

During this ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Government ensured that PWDs and the elderly, especially those who are bedridden, had unhindered access to their medical and social needs.

**Madam President,**

Substance abuse is a prevalent problem affecting Maldivian youth.

Government has adopted a holistic approach, primarily focusing on effective rehabilitation and reintegration.

Our Government hopes to establish 7 rehabilitation centres across Maldives and we have commenced work to upgrade the current Half-way House into a Drug Offender Remand Centre.

The Government plans to reintroduce methadone maintenance therapy as a part of an effort to introduce additional means for rehabilitation and the concept is being developed for a wellness centre dedicated to provide inpatient and outpatient services to victims of substance addiction.

**Madam President,**

While Maldives reflects on the progress achieved in this area, we accept that challenges persist at every step of the way. Maldives is committed to investing the time, political will, dedication and effective planning required, to build a resilient, empowered and a driven population.

We are confident that our Government’s plans for the near future will address the sector’s need for increased resource allocation, it’s demand for a well-trained workforce, and ensure digital integration to allow timely data collection and management, providing our stakeholders a measure of success.

We reassure our international partners that the Maldives will strive to implement the recommendations received from this process, to address the challenges faced by women and girls, strengthen child protection, while affording PWDs and the elderly access to fair and consistent social protection schemes, and enable every Maldivian to live and enjoy the dignified life they deserve.

Thank you.