

## INCREASING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS AND LEADERSHIP ROLES: AN UPHILL JOURNEY OF A SMALL ISLAND NATION

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### ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study was to explore factors affecting women's leadership and participation in politics, experienced in the small island nation of Maldives. This study employs concurrent mixed-methods design with a descriptive survey, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. To collect data, purposively selected 383 participants were surveyed, seven participants were interviewed, and a selection of related documents was examined. The findings of these data revealed three major factors contributing to women's lack of participation at different levels of the political arena. These factors were – men's underrating of women's potential; women's lack of initiation; and traditional and cultural perspectives. Likewise, three strategies that could enhance women's participation were identified: training and advocacy; implementation of the quota system; economic stability. These findings would be essential for the enhancement of gender equality in the country as they indicate areas that need immediate attention.

**Keywords:** Decision-making, Politics, Gender, Leadership, Participation, Women

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

International governing agencies such as United Nations (UN) have initiated quite a number of advocating programmes to promote women's rights and participation in different fields of the civil society. Women's rights are protected through international treaties such as International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (1976), the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1979), and Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW) (1993). In most of the countries, enactments of these conventions have enhanced women empowerment, impacting the development of civil, political, economic, and social rights of the women population.

Today, more than ever, women are actively participating and leading in the development process. However, there still exists many obstacles that impede women's efforts to contribute in the public domain. In many parts of the world, women are kept isolated, and constrained by sociocultural and legal structures that confine access to, involvement, and leadership in the development process (Domingo et al. 2015). The right for women and women's participation are restricted with limited access and opportunities, especially in the fields of politics and in decision-making roles (United Nations, 2014).

The obvious gender gap in the political arena is more prevalent in the developing world (Milazzo & Goldstein, 2019). Women empowerment approach is also ill-suited in countries where democracy is inadequately practiced, or is at an infant stage (United Nations, 2010). Democracy and nation's development are crucial elements for gender equality. For women empowerment, the two elements are indispensable because, when development increases with prevalence of democracy, more women acquire resources such as education, salaried labor-force experience, and training in the profession that dominate politics (Matland, 1998).

Being a developing country where multiparty democracy is quite a new concept, the small island nation of Maldives is committed to the principle of gender equality through numerous national and international commitments. Following the endorsement of many international legislations such as CEDAW, the country has developed standards and programmes that provide opportunities for women in various fields. "The Constitution of the Maldives (2008) guarantees equality between men and women, and gender mainstreaming has been adopted as national policy to integrate gender perspectives in policy, planning and budgeting" (UNDP, 2011, p. 1). It is also important to highlight the Gender Equality Law (2016) of Maldives which was one of the greatest achievements towards providing equal opportunities to both local men and women. This act strives to eliminate gender discrimination that has been engrained in the history of the country's population.

Regardless of the fact that women are entitled to autonomy and power that are endorsed through the above mentioned legislations, women participation in politics and at the leadership levels in Maldives is fairly low compared to the current population. A good mirror to indicate women's marginalisation is the current parliament which was elected in 2019. According to the statistics, among the members of the new parliament, there are only four women out of the 87 elected members (The Peoples' Majlis, 2020). With less than 5% of the seats, in the country's main legislative body, only four ladies represent the nation's women population.

Another evidence for the low participation of women is the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), a concept introduced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1995, which reflects the inequalities between men's and women's opportunities in a country's economic and political life. According to GEM, with a value of 0.429 (2007 index) Maldives ranks 90th out of 109 countries in the GEM (UNDP, 2011). On the other hand, as seen from the statistics on the website of Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), among all parliamentary structures of all the regions of the world, 23.97% consist of women (IPU, 2020). Hence, a considerable gap is apparent for women's opportunities to take an active part in the Maldivian women's political life.

As revealed from literature, women underrepresentation in politics is attributed to a number of reasons, including cultural factors, laws that discriminate against women, and non-inclusive political processes (Geha, 2019). In typical contexts, women experience limited access to informal political space even when their formal participation is secured through legislations. The barriers that stand in the way for women may differ from country to country. Hence, an in-depth exploration of the challenges that women encounter in their efforts to climb the political ladder is found to be mandatory.

A lot of attention has been attracted from the scholars to women's marginalisation in politics. However, reasons for women's low political participation, especially in leadership positions are poorly documented or explained so far. The investigations are sporadic in developing countries particularly where democracy is a newly practiced concept to its residents. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute towards filling the gap in literature by exploring inhibiting factors that affect women participation in political leadership and decision-making process in Maldives. Subsequent to this purpose, the study is guided with the following two research questions.

- i. What are the factors that inhibit women's participation in Maldivian politics?
- ii. What possible strategies can be used to enhance women's participation in political arena of Maldives?

## 2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As revealed from literature, there are two specific models that can explain reasons for women's underrepresentation in leadership positions. These two models are 'Individual or Meritocracy Model', and 'Woman's Place or Social Perspective Model' presented by Estler (1975). Following is a brief explanation of these two models, and other concepts related to the topic.

### 2.1 Individual or Meritocracy Model

According to Estler (1975), individual or meritocracy model is grounded on the assumption that the most competent people are promoted according to their ability. Therefore, men get the highest positions because of the belief that, men are the most qualified people in the pool of candidates for any given job (Estler, 1975). In addition, the model is based on the psychological perspective of women's orientations towards their individual characteristics, beliefs, and orientations towards a cause. According to this model, even though women are capable, and have the ability of running or organising a place, women themselves believe that they do not want the power; hence are reluctant to be in the higher positions (Grove & Montgomery, 2000). Nevertheless, Conner (1992) asserts that lack of desire to achieve power for women does not mean that, they do not want the power. The way women use power is significantly different, as women use powers more likely to benefit and empower others (Conner, 1992). Hence, to enhance women's self-esteem, and to eradicate the unbalance between men and women, the number of qualified women for different levels of the social trajectory have to be increased (Estler, 1975).

### 2.2 Women's Place or Social Perspective Model

According to this model, women participation and women involvement is based on culture and the social practices, with the assumption that, institutional practices reinforce the gender difference (Estler, 1975). Which therefore, emphasizes that women's roles are based on particular societal norms, understanding, and societal pattern regarding women and men's participation and understandings (Grove & Montgomery, 2000). As explained by Estler (1975), according to this perspective, "women and men have been taught to perceive their roles as very distinct and separate. At the extreme, for a woman to succeed in what society designates as a man's role means she has failed in her assigned role" (p.368). As result of this objectionable thinking, most women draw upon the traits considered appropriately feminine. Hence, the

social perspective model represents a world in which jobs are designated for men and women exclusively (Estler, 1975).

## 2.3 Women's Participation in Politics

In order to have a well-established society, each and every individual participation is needed, especially at the developing stage of a nation. Individual people within the society have greater influence on society as these individuals become leaders who are considered as the most powerful tool in the society (Byer, 1997). Despite the efforts, both internationally and nationally, women participation is found to be limited. In some parts of the world, women participation is restricted at the various societal hierarchy (Grove & Montgomery, 2005; United Nations, 2014). For example, in some countries, women participation is restricted at the political level, while in other places they are underrepresented as voters. Sometime, opportunities are limited to certain jobs leading to face various obstacles specially to reach at the leadership level (United Nation, 2017).

As Miranda (2005) elaborates, every human has the right to participate in all forms of societal activities without having any kind of discrimination. Women are even capable of understanding and have the ability to adjust and attain any given situation. Hence women should be given equal opportunities to participate and advocate their perspectives effectively within societies (Miranda, 2005). At various parts of the world, the work towards improving women empowerment and women participation has been increasing rapidly. Similarly, women in developing countries have come to believe that in order to increase their participation at various levels in the society, it is important to have specific agendas like political will in order to bring active transformations (United Nations, 2014).

## 2.4 Involvement of women in leadership and decision making process

If women are given equal opportunities and chances at the top-level of a country or a state, the impact which it brings to the country's economy and social development is enormous. According to United Nation (2005), in order to practice and establish good governance in a country or within a society, one of the key essential components is bringing women to the same level as men, or providing opportunities to women in the same way as it is given to men. This indicates that women's participation, competencies, and possessions as individuals and at a collective level is very important to develop a society (United Nations, 2014). However, in most cases, rather than getting opportunities in various economic activities like education, skill training, and logistic support, women are given opportunities and power to make changes at the household level (ODI, 2015). Nonetheless, women can succeed with the empowerments as they can enhance their potential power to change the community at local and national levels (Dormingo, et al , 2005).

It is also important to highlight the fact that women have the potential to participate in politics and compete with male political leaders (United Nations, 2014). A feminist theorist Lorber (1998) suggests that it is highly important to talk about the gender in the politics, as when one gender takes control of the whole political system, there are several drawbacks and implications (Crank, 2015). According to various researchers, if women are equally included and given chances as men, or if women have more opportunities to participate in the politics, it can be a path way to transform the political system formally and informally (European Union, 2013).

For instance, if women will get opportunities to actively participate in performing tasks in the planning process as men, it will eventually lead to run the various programs such as developmental programs, other various activities more effectively and affordably (Yogendarajah, 2013). Such levels of women enablement can have a great influence on the whole social system too. Hence, it can be believed that women participation is an important area which needs to be studied in order to find out their leadership qualities to practice within societies.

According to wide range of researchers, Southeast Asian women lag behind in the political rights and representation compared to any other part of the world (Fleschenberg & Derichs, 2011; Choi, 2019). It is also evident that in developing countries, women's political representation is fairly low compared to the improvements they have gained in terms of formal rights (Choi,2019). Organisations like United Nations (UN), and Women and Global Fund are enormously campaigning and investing to advocate the rights of women, and improving the status of women in politics around the globe. However, political representation in the various parts of the world seems to be under-growing, and women's representation is fairly low in particular at the local governance level (UNDP,2010; Choi,2019).

## **2.5 Previous research on women participation in politics and leadership positions**

The body of literature about women's role and their level of participation in political arena is a prospective area in research. Following are some examples of such studies, especially targeted at developing countries.

A study conducted about women representation in education and leadership position in Kenya — one of the developing countries in East Africa (Amondi, 2011), suggested that women representation in the country is fairly low even though women are contributors in the national productivity as well as in the educational sector. The study informed various barriers leading to the underrepresentation including organisational, individual, and social-cultural factors (Amondi, 2011). Likewise, some of the individual barriers highlighted were, women as individuals considering them as the cause for their representations. Meaning, women themselves are not assertive enough to gain power, they themselves lack the self-confidence and are unwilling to apply for higher positions (Amondi ,2011; Growe & Montgomery, 2000).

Geha (2019) conducted a similar study in Lebanon, a country with an upper-middle income economy. It was revealed that, feminism and female representation is alarmingly lower in the country. The author explained that because of the lower status, agencies such as UN are trying hard to target individual women to improve their capacities. However, the author has claimed that it is unlikely that such efforts may become fruitful in contexts like Lebanese where women are so much underrepresented, unheard, and are not given opportunities to run for political positions. According to the author, one of the most common statements about women representations is entirely blaming women for not competing in elections.

In addition to the above, there were several studies which showed positive outcomes of contexts where women have equal or higher representations. For instance, a study conducted to understand the gender-related influences on cooperative sustainability based on women in board of directors in Australia (Galbreath, 2011) suggested that the work of women board members was significantly related with the sustainability, social responsiveness and economic

growth. Moreover, it was suggested that improving gender diversity will be able to improve the relationship between various stakeholders. Thus, women on board tend to work on more sustainable manners, and are more associated with firm decisions based on sustainability (Galbreath, 2011).

The above literature indicates that women empowerment is an important concept for the development of a nation. To develop a society, it is important to have equal participations from both the genders. Subsequently, as women participation is significantly low in the political field in most countries (United Nations, 2014), enormous efforts are required to improve the situation, especially in politics and at the decision-making level. In addition, the review of literature also reveals a paucity of research investigating issues for women's underrepresentation observed in countries across the globe.

### 3.0 METHOD

This study employs concurrent mixed-methods design (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) with a descriptive survey, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The survey seeks to know the perspective from a larger population, which is important as this study involves understanding of the stakeholders and decision makers at the various levels of the societal trajectory. The semi-structured interviews as well as the selected documents provide an in-depth understanding about the issues experienced by the selected samples.

#### 3.1 Research site

The context of this research is a small island nation – Maldives. Being an independent country, Maldives is a signatory member of a quite large number of organisations which work towards the empowerment of women and girls. Maldives has ratified international law on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), International Covenant on Civil and Political Right (CCPR) (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2020). In Addition, Maldives has ratified all the eight fundamentals of International Labour Organization (ILO). Maldives is also a member of the Commonwealth Action Plans on Gender Equality and Regional Initiatives, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and a member state of Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Also, Maldives has committed to achieve the sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

In the political history of Maldives, the latest constitution – “Fehigaanoonu Asaasee” of 2008 was ratified with the removal of various gender biased articles consisted in the previous constitution. In the current constitution, some important articles and amendments were made in the aspect of gender equality and, notably removed the article which was about banning women standing for presidency (Ministry of Gender and Family and Social Services, 2020). With the passing of Gender Equality Law of 2016, much importance was focused to increase the representation of women leaders at the higher positions of the government (Hope for Women, 2016). This new law prohibits all kinds and forms of gender discrimination at all the levels. It also promotes participation and representation of women in public and private sectors as well as in politics. For instance, in September 2019, for the first time ever, two female justices were appointed to the Supreme Court of Maldives (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2019). In addition, very recently, the gender quota system was introduced in Maldives, and it was implemented in the local council election of 2021.

Moreover, the Decentralisation Act (2010), obligates the local councils to establish Women Development Committees (WDC), which is an integral part of establishing local governance.

In addition to the above, the National Gender Policy for 2016-2021 is an ongoing policy, which aims to focus on improving women participation at the various levels, especially at the political level. In this policy document, ways to increase women representation at the political and the management level are highlighted with an explanation of temporary measures (Hope for Women, 2016). However, even with the enactment of Gender law, and the Gender Policy, results of the efforts to eradicate gender disparity are considered as very low. Following are some examples to support this stance.

Among the 99 political appointees of the current government which came to power in 2018, only 24 were women (24%). Likewise, amongst the current council members, only 39 women (6%) were elected for the current local councils. In addition, only 4 seats out of 87 are held by women in the Maldivian Parliament. Further, of the 20 cabinet members, 7 are female leaders though it is little bit higher compared to the previous cabinets (Ministry of Gender and Family and Social Services, National Bureau of Statistics & Ministry of Planning Housing and Infrastructure, 2020). Moreover, there are six political parties registered at the Election Commission of Maldives, out of which, only one of the parties has reserved slots for women at the party council level and atoll / city level but not at the parliament level (Hope for Women, 2016).

## 3.2 Participants

A total of 383 participants were conveniently selected to be the participants of this research. The participants were all female, and they were selected from different government and non-government institutions. These institutions include the parliament, different ministries, higher education providers, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), independent governing bodies, and atoll and island councils. The participants were from all levels of the institutions (including Chief Executive Officers (CEO), Members of Parliament (MP), State Ministers (SM), administrative staff etc.). Collecting data from deliberate samples of these government and non-government bodies would enable to extract data that allows deeper insight about the reasons for the women's low participation in the field.

## 3.3 Data collection and analysis

In order to collect data for this research, a survey questionnaire which was adapted from previously developed tools of Ahmed (2013) and Wambua (2013) was used. As elucidated by these two authors, both the questionnaires were validated by a panel of experts in their respective studies. In the same manner, to check the validity and the reliability of the instrument of this study, a pilot test was conducted in a selective private organisation and one government office of Maldives. Apart from the pilot test, three experts in the field confirmed the content validity of the questionnaire. Based on these experts' suggestions, amendments were brought onto the instrument before it was implemented in the final research.

In addition to the survey instrument, seven female participants were interviewed so that more breadth and depth were added to the investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). These interview participants include one parliament member, three state ministers, one CEO, and two executive

level leaders, so that multiple perspectives on the matter would be obtained. Semi-structured questions were adopted during the interview of these participants. Furthermore, data from certain documents were selected to be analysed in this study. These documents include specific law embedded guidelines of Maldives including, the Employment Law 2008, Gender Equality Act 2016, which all explain the recruitments criteria for higher political posts.

Once the survey instrument was returned, the responses were entered into SPSS and analysed for frequency and percentage of distribution. Data from the interview were analysed qualitatively using the procedures of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Likewise, data from the selected documents were investigated qualitatively using summative content analysis method (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

## 4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the findings of this study, a number of important concepts related to women's lack of participation in politics and leadership were identified. These findings are explained and discussed in the following sections.

### 4.1 Demographic details of the participants

For this particular research, all the selected participants were female members working at different institutions selected for this study. These different institutions include; Ministry of Education, Ministry of Gender and Family, Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Economic Development, The Maldives National University, Human Rights Commission of Maldives, Hope for Women (an NGO), the current Maldivian Parliament, atoll councils, and island councils. Demographic details showed that, amongst the participants, the age group with 31 to 40 years had the most number of participants with a percentile of 37.6 in overall. The second highest with a percentile of 27.2, was from the age category of 25 to 30 years. Table 1 shows the different positions these participants held at their respective institutions.

**Table 1: Different Positions of the Participants**

	Frequency	Percent
Executive level	51	13.3
Other Leadership Positions	17	4.4
Administrative level	206	53.8
Other	109	28.5
Total	383	100.0

According to the results, it was identified that the greatest number of participants (53.8%) were working at administrative positions, while 17.7% of the women were working at both the leadership and executive level positions. These executive and leadership positions include



CEOs, Parliament members, State Ministers, Managing Directors and senior management members of various offices.

Table 2 represents participants' educational levels. According to the results in Table 2, the highest number of participants have obtained certificate level qualification (n=122), while 35 (9.1%) of the women have obtained Masters level qualification. These details signify the fact that, most of the participants' education was at a remarkable level in general, as more than 68% of the women have obtained above Diploma level qualifications.

**Table 2: Professional Qualifications**

	Frequency	Percent
Masters	35	9.1
Under Graduate	117	30.5
Diploma	109	28.5
Certificate level	122	31.9
Total	383	100.0

## 4.2 Factors for women's lack of participation in politics and in decision making process

Findings of this study revealed three major factors that influence women's lack of participation in politics and in leadership roles. These three factors were (1) men's underrating of women's potential, (2) women's lack of initiation, and (3) traditional and cultural perspective. Following is a discussion of these three factors.

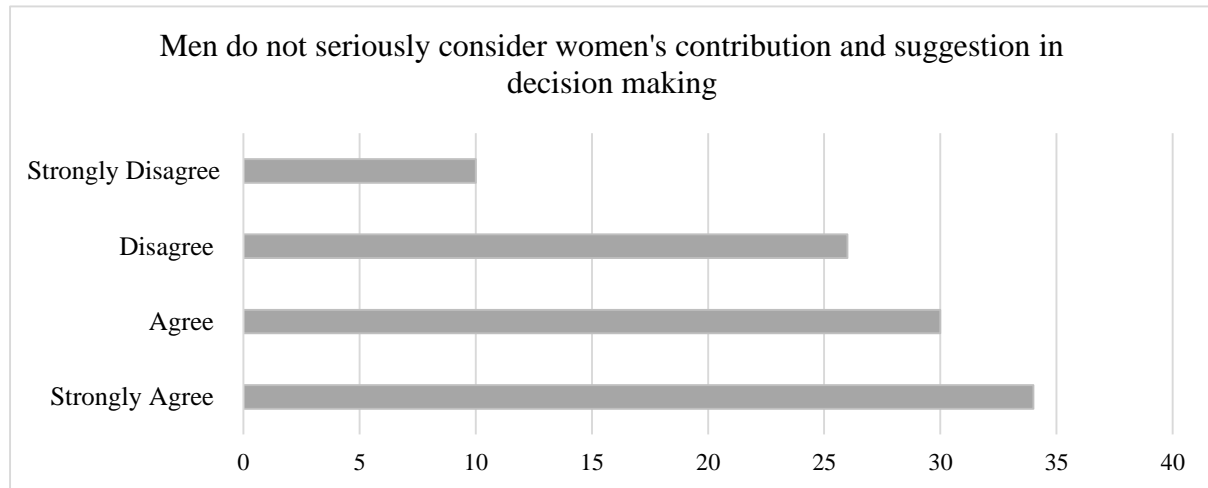
### 4.2.1 Men's underrating of women's potential

According to the findings of this study, men's undervaluing and misinterpretation of women's potential were discovered as one of the factors that lead to inhibit women from aspiring to higher positions in politics and other professions. Accordingly, as seen from Figure 1, amongst the survey respondents, more than 60% of women believed that male leaders at the top level do not consider women's contribution, especially at the leadership and political levels.

However, in contrast to how men's views were perceived by the respondents, these female participants believe that women are competent in various areas related to their profession including financial management skills, time management, problem solving skills, stress management, decision making, and planning.

In addition, finding of this study revealed that in some fields of the society, men dishonor and obstruct women's work substantially. As such, the interviewed parliament member claimed that when arranging various meetings at the parliament, the opposite gender tend to set difficult times purposefully to dishonor the females within the parliament meetings and hearings. She reported that, "When arranging committee meetings after the working hours, even if we request, they would purposefully select a time which will be difficult for us to attend, like the only time we set to be with kids or the time we have to fetch our kids from schools which they

would know obviously”. This reporting indicates the struggles women might have to endure when they attain higher level political positions despite their academic credibility and capability.



**Figure 1: Participants views regarding men’s consideration of women’s contribution and suggestion in decision making.**

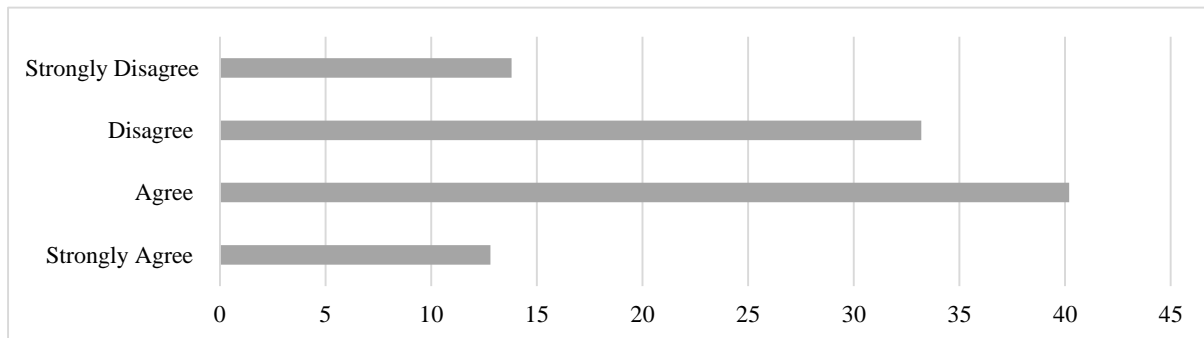
Findings about the above situations are very much alike to the concept of Estler (1975)’s Woman’s-Place Model which elucidates that, even with adequate educational qualifications and experiences, women are underrated and unappreciated in societies. Likewise, literature shows similar sentiments observed in several other studies (see Amondi, 2011; Grove & Montgomery, 2000; Powell & Mukazhanova-Powell, 2019). Similar to the finding of the current study, Powell and Mukazhanova-Powell (2019) confirmed that unlike their counterparts, women at managerial level are likely to be more negatively judged in their competence regardless of actual performance. Hence, as asserted by Estler (1975) and many other advocates (e.g. Grove & Montgomery, 2000; Yogendarajah, 2013), such discriminatory practices must be eradicated so that women would receive a proportionate level of opportunities to reach their level of competence in the field.

**4.2.2 Lack of women’s initiation**

Another contributing factor for women’s inhibition in political and leadership positions was women’s lack of initiation to participate in politics and higher-level leadership activities. According to the survey results, 53% of the participants (n=203) believed that most women would never apply for leadership positions as depicted in Figure 2. From the interview data also, it was identified that in general, women do not have ambitions to join into politics nor to move further into leadership positions, in accordance with the society’s beliefs and possibilities. An articulation of one of the senior management members clearly revealed her reasons for not making an effort to move higher in the hierarchy. She stated,

“as a senior management member, I do not intend to go beyond my current level. As there are so many factors.... Firstly, I do not believe I would be able to run and lead an organisation like a man does as us women are weak .... Secondly, the society will not

accept me as a political leader, as in our culture men are favored upon women over leadership positions”.



**Figure 2: Perception that most women never apply for leadership positions**

Review of the legal documents used in this study shows that, in the local council elections, 33% quota are allocated for women. The quota system is a good indication of Maldivian women’s low level of willingness and readiness to contest and secure seats in local elections. Because of the quota system, and women’s reluctance, political parties are forced to seek, find, and train women candidates – efforts that they may not have made otherwise.

According to the review of electoral legal framework of the Maldives conducted by Transparency Maldives (2020), in 2014, only 23 women contested for the Parliament among a total of 302 candidates, and five of them secured seats. As reported in this review document, electing only 23 women for the Parliament was far below the international average, and it was one of the lowest rates of women’s representation in South Asia. Therefore, this consistent drop in the number of women getting elected to the Parliament is a highly concerning issue to the nation (Transparency Maldives, 2020). Nonetheless, it could be believed that the legal quota would create some awareness with the local community to empower and motivate women to initiate participation in politics.

### 4.2.3 Traditional and cultural perspectives

The final factor for having fewer female leaders in the society is due to the traditional believe systems of the society. More than half of the survey participants (61%) suggested that the society’s traditional beliefs have huge impact on women’s involvement at higher levels in different sectors. Survey results as well as interview findings showed that due to traditional beliefs and norms of the society, women political leaders are not welcomed and accepted. The community as a whole (including women) do not consider that women have the power and ability to represent themselves as leaders. This could be one of the major reasons why Maldives is still lagging behind in empowering women at the political and leadership levels even after the ratification of many international laws and protocols. For instance, more than two decades have passed since Maldives has ratified CEDAW, yet there is not much improvement seen in the representation of women in Maldivian politics.

Moreover, longitudinal studies conducted by the HCRM in 2005 and 2011 found out that number of males who believed that women should participate in the politics were decreased by

15% (The Human Right Commission of Maldives, 2011). Radical campaigns against participation of women in politics, public, and professional life was a major reason that limits experience and low political commitment amongst women (Human Rights Commission of the Maldives, 2012). Such beliefs of a patriarchy system displaying differential socialisation for men and women were the essence of Estler (1975)'s Woman's-Place Model. Hence, owing to these findings, it can be said that the traditional believes, norms and ethics play an important role about Maldivian women's participation and attitude to participate in the political and leadership activities.

### **4.3 Strategies to enhance women's political participation and leadership**

According to the findings, it was evident that participants of this study had a strong and positive mindset about the benefits of women's empowerment in the society. Accordingly, 95% of participants believed that women should be given equal opportunities to be participated in politics and other decision-making processes of the country irrespective of the political party, government, or society they belong to. When asked about the tactics that could enhance women's contribution, participants reported three major strategies. Following are details of these strategies.

#### **4.3.1 Training and advocacy**

Findings of the data affirmed that increasing awareness and advocacy are needed in order to increase women's participation in politics and leadership roles. Results of the survey showed that 42.3% of the respondents agreed that women need training and awareness programs to overcome the obstacles. Same sentiments were also identified from the interviews. These viewpoints about societal awareness was aligned with UNDP (2011), as the agency recommended to have agreements between government bodies and stakeholders in order to minimise gender inequality within the country. UNDP (2011) suggested to have high levels of expertise forums and seminars about the legal and policy implementation to improve women's situation.

According to the World Human Development Index of 2019, Maldives ranked 104 out of 189 countries at the human development category. Additionally, in the Gender Development Index (GDI), Maldives fell into category – 3, with GDI as 0.939 (UNDP, 2019). In alignment with these facts, a research conducted by Transparency of Maldives (2015) discovered that, men tend to show high level of interest in the governmental issues, and they tend to be intrigued about those issues, whereas amongst women, only one in ten women had the interest in the government related issues. Therefore, it is believed that various trainings and advocacy programs are needed to make women get attracted into politics and leadership positions. It is important to incorporate political awareness through formal and civic education programs as several experts have recommended (Goetz, 2003; IFES, 2015).

#### **4.3.2 Implementation of the quota system**

According to the results of the survey and interviews, effective implementation of the quota system was identified as a practical strategy to increase the number of women at all levels of the local governance. More than 60% of the participants agreed that it is important to have electoral quota system as it assists to increase the participation of women in politics.

Apparently, the amendments passed in 2019 to the Decentralization Act of Maldives by the parliament, included the provision of one third quota in all local councils to women. In the history of Maldives, this is the very first time such a deliberative step was taken to improve gender imbalance in decision-making levels, especially in the field of politics (Transparency Maldives, 2020). Undoubtedly, this new electoral framework would be a positive step to eradicate constant gender disparity entrenched in the community.

The above quota system was deliberated to local councils only; however, participants indicated that the quota system should be given not only within the local councils' election but also within the political party system too. According to Hope for Women (2016), there is no published documents which could be available to see the women appointees at the hierarchy of political parties in the Maldives. Hence, we believe it is imperative to extend quota systems into other areas such as the parliament, political parties, and within the composition of the cabinet ministers too. On the same note, we believe that rigorous application of these quotas must be reached in practice.

According to the experience of some countries, the principle of a quota for women's representation promised to women was hardly enforced. For instance, in some countries such as South Africa, Congo, and Burundi, the principle of quota allocated in the constitution for equal representation was not applied since the mechanisms for implementing parity were never adopted (International Alert, 2012). Nevertheless, we believe that, unlike these countries, if quotas for women are deliberated and implemented in political institutions, it would lead to substantial reduction of inequalities between men and women in the country.

### 4.3.2 Economic stability

Economic stability was discovered as the third strategy that could improve women's political participation and leadership efforts in the Maldivian context. Findings showed that more than 60% of the participants agreed that economic empowerment is important to bring more women into the challenging arena of politics. Many of the interviewed participants reiterated that women cannot strive in politics owing to economic obstacles existed in their way. One of the interview participants elaborated the reasons in detail.

“...suppose if we want to independently participate (as an independent candidate) in an election, there is no way we could. Most of the people here in Maldives are not financially stable, so even if we want to participate as a political leader, there is no financial mechanism to support us... of course we cannot spend all our saving just to participate in an election and lose”.

Finace is certainly associated with political success, yet most Maldivian women are not financially independent to contest for a seat in an election. Therefore, it is important to establish a mechanism where the women political participants are provided with a financial back-up system to make them economically stable. Literature is consistent with these viewpoints. For instance, according to the study conducted by Bhatia and Singh (2019), the effect of financial inclusion on empowerment of women in urban slums showed that, women with access to specific financial schemes have higher overall social, political, and economic empowerment. In another study conducted in Iran, Shojaei, Samsu, and Asayesh (2010) stressed that inadequate financial resources act as the structural obstacles of Iranian women in top political

positions. Hence, the use of efficient public financing including, better regulation of campaign funding, the creation of alternative resources, and the allocation of a percentage of the funds provided to political parties to spend on female candidatures, are amongst some methods which the above authors have recommended.

## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Women participation in civil, political, economic, and social areas indicate more than an issue of human rights and social justice. When women participate in areas such as politics, there is an increase of positive results in combating social and economic inequalities. The outcome is positive because, women actively involve, prioritise, and advocate problems that have an important aspect to social implications.

The aim of this research was to address concerns of many advocates who work hard to promote equal rights and opportunities for both men and women, especially in the field of politics and other leadership roles. In this paper, we have focused on two main areas; factors which contribute to the lack of participation of women in Maldivian politics, and strategies that can be used to enhance women's participation in politics and leadership roles. As confirmed from the findings, the three major factors that influence women's lack of participation were: men's underrating of women's potential; women's lack of initiation; and traditional and cultural perspective. Likewise, the three strategies that could enhance women's participation were – training and advocacy; implementation of the quota system; and economic stability.

These findings explain the difficulties as well as remedies in improving the role of women in politics in the Maldivian context. In a community where the principle of gender equality was kept skeptical, particularly regarding women's representation in governing political bodies, these findings would enlighten means to improve the situation. As such, we recommend to conduct awareness programmes for women, especially to train women political candidates to help build their capacities. We also recommend concerned authorities to offer civic education and sensitisation campaigns in the local community regarding gender equality. To conduct such an operation at a large scale, cooperation from all stakeholders of the society are obligatory. It is also necessary to develop and enforce policies that evaluate the country's execution of the legal frameworks and international treaties in order to ensure women's fair access to political spheres—as voters, candidates, elected officials and civil service members. Future research can focus on evaluating practical implementation of these legal frameworks and treaties.

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