

**Address by the Minister of State for Health H E Dunya Maumoon at the
Launching of the National Survey on Gender Diversity and Empowerment in
Maldives – Women in Leadership Roles**

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Bismillah-i-Rahman-i-Raheem

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Members of the Executive Board,
Distinguished Invitees

Assalam Alaikum Warahmathullahi Wabarakaathuhu & Good morning to you all

It is with great pleasure that I stand here today, in recognition of a valuable work undertaken by Women on Boards. First, let me offer my sincere congratulations to this small yet immensely effective NGO – Women on Boards - that has made a big name for its great work in a very short span of time. The Founder and President of Women on Boards Madam Fathimath Shafeega. Please accept my warm felicitations to you and to your very able team that has generated and completed a very pertinent survey and study that will make an important contribution to our national discourse on the empowerment of women.

Four decades after the First World Conference on Women, held in 1975, the world is still charting its course towards gender equality. In a post-Beijing era, the Millennium Development Goals and the new Sustainable Development Goals have indeed brought about institutional changes at governmental levels, effecting the global positive trajectory towards achieving gender equality. From the declining gender-gap in secondary and tertiary enrollment to the diminished maternal mortality rates the Maldives has also achieved successes over the decades but the big picture remains unresolved.

There is a very clear and inevitable correlation between our developmental goals and diminished gender gaps. Just as how the MDGs played a vital role in closing these gaps in our national gender framework, the SDGs constitute a blue-print

that will shape the developmental priorities of our society. One of the main positive driving forces of our national economy is that there is no formal restriction for women to join the labour force.

In the early 1980s for the first-time education was a national developmental priority. Soon social tides began to change and it became customary for both girls and boys to join the work force upon completion of education and begin their contribution to the household incomes. Nationally, prioritizing education as a key developmental goal has played a pivotal role in shaping today's labour force as well as society. Indeed, what has not caught up to the transformations is the low number of women in leadership roles.

Socially prescribed roles for women have held them back in attaining these positions. Though women are equal participants in the workplace, they shoulder the additional load of homemaking. The reality is that even in the year 2017, homemaking is considered a woman's job alone in many societies including ours. Hence due to this culturally carved out double-role for women, leadership positions do not hold any glamour.

There are few keys that could unlock these gaps and open the floodgates for women leaders.

Focusing on and continuing to make education a crucial developmental goal is the primary key. Education of girls have contributed to alleviation of poverty and history has proven that education transforms societies. Especially the education of girls brings about unprecedented advancement and modernization both to families and societies. Though varied and multilayered challenges still disadvantage girls' to attain a successful education, staying the course is imperative. At the national level we need to inject a further trigger into our developmental blue-print;- developing transformational leaders. Educational programmes devised towards instilling leadership qualities in young girls have been tried and tested in some countries and have proven beneficial. These programmes develop young leaders who are ready to lead in various roles in society.

The secondary key is climbing the culturally constructed walls. Though a handful of women have shattered the glass-ceiling and dismantled the socially carved

roles they continue to face negative attitudes from society. Women serving long-hours at the workplace is still frowned upon and a woman's iron-clad commitment and diligence to her job is still questioned. Negative stereotyping of working women as "irresponsible homemakers" prevent women from assuming leadership roles – roles that would require them to give considerable hours – hours taken away from their homes. Despite the advantages of modernization in some corners of our islands it is still taboo for girls to assume work outside the island. These negative attitudes have long prevented women from taking up jobs in the tourism sector – the highest revenue generating economic industry in the country.

So, how do we make leadership positions more attractive for women? A recent study conducted by the Norwegian Business School concluded that women make better leaders. The study, led by Professor Øyvind Martinsen, assessed the personality and characteristics of nearly 3,000 managers. In nearly all areas, they concluded that women were better leaders than their male counterparts. Women outperformed men in four of the five categories: initiative and clear communication; openness and ability to innovate; sociability and supportiveness; and methodical management and goal-setting.

Having more women in leadership positions in the workplace also have a positive impact on the environment's policies and strategies that reduce the diversity gap. Women in leadership roles are also uniquely placed to offer mentorships. Women need role-models. And they are exceptionally important in shattering the socially constructed perceptions and attitudes that limit a young girl's views of her own economic empowerment. I strongly believe that the handful of women leaders in our country can play a more active role in using their position to mentor young girls as well as draw high visibility to their positions. At a time when social media is at our fingertips and the role of the media is ever-increasingly pertinent, positive narratives that would shift the focus to more enabling social roles would pave an unprecedented way for young girls in our country.

At a national level, we need to establish affirmative and transformative policies that will put in place an enabling infrastructure for women to progress in their careers. Raising awareness on the benefits of women in leadership roles both at familial and societal levels, developing safety nets for working women and introducing alternative methods of childcare are some approaches that could be

thought upon. The recently introduced flexi-working hours and extended maternity leave of 60 days without weekends and public holidays are indeed positive steps.

Women's role as mothers also place them in a pivotal position; a position through which they can nurture and bring up young boys who view working women with respect. Young men who accept the role of working women in a society can help in changing the archaic lenses through which women are perceived.

Finally, a discussion on the economic empowerment of women cannot be complete without a mention of how Islam liberated women from economic destitution. At a time when female infanticide was high and women could not own property, Islam established women as separate legal entities. Islam honoured women in society by elevating them and protecting them with unprecedented legal rights. Islam gave women the right to education, to work, to own and sell property, and to participate in civic and political engagement. Islam established marriage as a partnership. As Muslims we have the fortunate opportunity to draw inspiration from the life of Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) wife- Khadija RA. Her role as a leading businesswoman and her support of the Prophet's (SAW) work and vice versa continue to inspire generations. Khadija RA's role serves as proof that Islam does not set limits to women's empowerment and that the social and cultural inhibitions laid down for women in different jurisdictions are not associated with Islam.

Before I conclude I would like to make one final point.

The Government of President Abdulla Yameen came to office in November 2013 with a manifesto outlining two significant policies relating to women's rights: the empowerment of women, socially, economically and politically, and zero tolerance for violence against women. The six pledges that follow from these two policies are, eliminating barriers for women to join the work force; fostering opportunities for women's participation in political sphere; enhancing economic empowerment of women; adopting zero tolerance to violence and harassment against women through the enactment of relevant legal instruments; protecting families from experiencing negative consequences from divorce; and, ensuring equal distribution of matrimonial property after divorce. Nationally extensive

work has been undertaken at the institutional level to improve the legislative framework and legal safeguards that protect the rights of all in the society.

I sincerely believe that the milestone achieved by Women on Boards with assistance from the British Government is a huge contribution to the national discourse. This National Survey on Gender Diversity and Empowerment in Maldives proves that there is room for women's empowerment in leadership roles in Maldives. As a vibrant and energetic society, with both men and women contributing to the development of the country, I believe that the Maldives is steadily laying down the building blocks to develop young women leaders. Here's hoping for a brighter future for our young aspiring women leaders, leaders who own their success.

I wish the best for the ensuing discussions today. I hope that the discussions of the report's findings with the relevant stakeholders will prove beneficial in putting together a white paper that could form the basis for a governmental-level deliberation.

Thank you.