



Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

Distr.: General
25 October 2021

Original: English

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Eightieth session

Summary record of the 1817th meeting*

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Thursday, 21 October 2021, at 10 a.m.

Chair: Ms. Acosta Vargas

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention *(continued)*

Sixth periodic report of Maldives (continued) ([CEDAW/C/MDV/6](#); [CEDAW/C/MDV/Q/6](#) and [CEDAW/C/MDV/RQ/6](#))

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Maldives took places at the Committee table.*
2. **The Chair** said that, at the invitation of the Committee, other members of the delegation would be speaking via video link.

Articles 10–14 (continued)

3. **Ms. Aishath Mohamed Didi** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that women currently participated in non-traditional fields of education and training, such as water sports, diving, pilot training, engineering and architecture. A small number of women had also been trained to steer maritime vessels. The relevant statistics would be provided in due course. Vocational training in areas such as carpentry and welding was provided for both boys and girls in grades 8 to 10 of secondary schools, and girls were encouraged to participate in higher education.
4. **Ms. Dettmeijer-Vermeulen** said that only 42 per cent of the female population were economically active, primarily in agriculture, and 75 per cent of persons benefiting from income support were women employed in the agricultural sector. As women's access to the main labour market was a great deal lower than that of men, she asked whether there were any plans to address the current obstacles to their access and to combat gender stereotyping. In that connection, she welcomed the State party's day-care plans and asked whether any labour-related results had been achieved to date. She was also interested in hearing about measures to harmonize the family and work responsibilities of women and men, to create employment opportunities for women and to increase their financial independence.
5. She asked why the increased involvement of the female population in training for a wide variety of trades and professions was not reflected in the labour market. She trusted that the State party would continue to collect data on women's participation in the labour market, preferably on an annual basis and disaggregated in terms of areas of work and the pay gap.
6. According to the State party's report, both the Employment Act and the Prevention of Sexual Harassment Act guaranteed non-discrimination in the workforce. She wished to know what steps had been taken to enhance awareness among women employees, including migrant women, of the applicable legal provisions and the remedies available to protect their rights. Were there any plans to evaluate the results?
7. The State party had not yet ratified the International Labour Organization (ILO) Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) or the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. In 2020, the Ministry of Defence and Maldives Immigration had amended expatriate regulations and developed a new visa policy that imposed a ceiling on the number of foreign workers. Noting that 8 per cent of migrant workers were women, she asked whether the provisions prioritizing Maldivian workers also prioritized women.
8. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic had led to a dramatic decline in the number of inspections of workplaces by the Labour Relations Authority. She wished to know whether the number had increased to its former level. As domestic workers were eligible for protection under the Domestic Violence Prevention Act, she asked how the Government regulated and monitored the conditions of migrant domestic workers. Could the Labour Relations Authority conduct inspections in private homes, were inspectors trained to detect signs of trafficking, and were abusive employers liable to payment of fines or prosecution?
9. **Ms. Aishath Mohamed Didi** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that extended family structures had enabled women to work outside their homes in the past, but nuclear families now prevailed and employment for both parents was very difficult in the absence of

childcare facilities. One of the challenges faced by the new Island Women Development Committees was the provision of safe care services for children, with a view to facilitating local women's access to employment.

10. **Ms. Imad** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that no restrictions were imposed on women in the labour force. The Employment Act had recently been amended. Section 4 prohibited discrimination based, inter alia, on a person's sex or marital status. Section 43 provided for maternity leave of 60 days, including 30 days prior to childbirth, and an additional 28 days of unpaid leave both prior to and after childbirth. Section 44 provided for the right to return to work after maternity leave. Section 45 provided for two 30-minute breaks from work each day during the first year after childbirth. Section 46 entitled either parent to a year of unpaid leave on expiry of maternity leave.

11. The SME Development Finance Corporation had accorded 270 million rufiyaa (Rf) to more than 200 businesswomen, mainly in the areas of commerce, tourism and manufacturing, in order to secure their financial independence. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Corporation had accorded about Rf 150 million to 500 women. Women's participation in agriculture had also been facilitated: they accounted for about 40 per cent of farmers receiving contracts from the Agro National Corporation. An increasing number of women were also actively involved in technology-based farming such as hydroponics and vertical farming.

12. The Ministry of Economic Development was currently formulating an unemployment insurance scheme in cooperation with the World Bank. It was also developing a social protection framework and a revised pension strategy. A minimum wage without any gender-based discrimination would be adopted prior to 2022. In addition, there were plans to promulgate an occupational health and safety act and an industrial relations act in the near future.

13. The inspection task force that monitored the conditions of migrant workers and the applicable regulations had been reinforced. A guideline specified their accommodation conditions, and migrant labour management policies were being amended.

14. **Ms. Riyaza** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that the labour-force participation rate of women was low compared to that of men. On the other hand, 46 per cent of women were employed in the informal sector, compared to 36 per cent of men. The labour-force data system needed to be strengthened. A census planned for September 2022 would include updated labour-market statistics, especially concerning informal employment and women's participation in the labour force. The recent promulgation of the Statistics Act would provide essential legal backing for the labour force survey, which would henceforth be conducted every three years. A labour module had also been included in the Household Income and Expenditure Survey.

15. **Ms. Yumna** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that 684 persons had participated in events organized by the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services on subjects such as gender orientation and awareness-raising, the Prevention of Sexual Harassment Act, the Domestic Violence Prevention Act and the Gender Equality Act. They had also discussed procedures for handling complaints of employee harassment and domestic violence.

16. Steps had been taken to establish affordable day-care centres and there were currently five private childcare facilities in Male'. The Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services was working with the Ministry of National Planning and the Asian Development Bank on a project to establish an affordable day-care centre in Male'.

17. Measures were being developed to enable female employees to remain in the labour force. Discussions had been held with UN-Women in 2019 on an agricultural skills development programme to be implemented through the Island Women Development Committees. However, it had not yet been implemented owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. There were also plans to implement strategies aimed at promoting women's participation and equality of opportunity in non-traditional areas under the Gender Equality Action Plan.

18. **Ms. Aishath Mohamed Didi** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that although progressive developments in maternity and paternity policy had not yet been incorporated

into existing legislation, the Ministry of Economic Development would reflect them in its current amendments to the Unemployment Act. A civil service directive currently guaranteed maternity and paternity benefits for all civil servants. Research needed to be conducted to ensure that similar benefits were available in the private sector.

19. Social stigma had prevented any increase in the percentage of women employed in the tourism sector. The Government's homestay policy would provide Maldivians with the opportunity to promote tourism. It would also enable women to enhance their skills and remove existing barriers. The Ministry of Tourism was supporting the policy through the Voluntary Relocation Programme.

20. **Ms. Gbedemah** noted that maternity leave was divided into periods before and after childbirth. International practice was moving away from such rigid divisions. Pregnant women should not be forced to take 28 days' leave prior to childbirth if they were in good health and capable of performing their duties at work. At the same time, she considered that the 60-day maternity leave granted by the State party was inadequate. In jurisdictions that divided maternity leave into periods before and after childbirth, women who refrained from taking leave prior to childbirth were sometimes denied all maternity leave. She asked whether that was the case in the State party.

21. Given the difficulties encountered in promoting comprehensive maternity leave in the private sector, she asked whether the State party had considered incorporating such leave into insurance schemes and social security practices.

22. **Ms. Imad** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that the maternity leave system was quite flexible. Women employees were not required to take maternity leave prior to childbirth. Such leave, including six-month maternity leave, was granted at the employee's request.

23. **Ms. Aishath Mohamed Didi** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that an employee could choose the timing and length of her maternity leave. Upon coming to power in 2018, the Government had extended paid maternity leave for State employees from four to six months, also increasing State employees' paid paternity leave from three days to one month. Once the revision of the Employment Act was complete, those changes would become law. While it was overhauling the Employment Act, the Government would also consider incorporating maternity leave into insurance schemes and social security practices as an option for the private sector.

24. **Ms. Stott Despoja**, noting that the National Reproductive Health Strategy of 2014–2018 had been an important step in providing non-discriminatory health care to women and girls, said that she wished to know whether further steps would be taken to ensure the incorporation of comprehensive, age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health education, including information about and access to contraceptive methods and family planning, in all schools and the national curriculum. Had the updates to the national curriculum relating to women's health mentioned in the previous day's meeting incorporated sexual and reproductive health education? If not, she hoped the delegation could give a timeline for their incorporation.

25. She wondered what steps were being taken towards effective implementation of the Health Sector Response to Gender-based Violence guidelines and the Gender-based Violence Action Plan of 2016, whether they had been successful and what progress had been made in establishing courses, both online and in person, to train health-care professionals in preventing and treating gender-based violence. The difficulty of retaining health personnel in Maldives had been mentioned in the previous day's meeting; it would be useful to hear more information on that issue in relation to preventing gender-based violence.

26. A timeline for the prohibition and criminalization of female genital mutilation in the Penal Code would be welcome. She wished to know what measures had been taken to address increasingly extreme ideologies, such as black magic and exorcism, that were impacting on the health and well-being of women and girls, and what steps the State party had taken to protect the most vulnerable from such practices.

27. She wondered what measures had been taken, since the Demographic and Health Survey of 2016–2017, to collect data and conduct research on the prevalence of unsafe and

illegal abortions, disaggregated by age and geographic location. She would appreciate an account of how the State party planned to prevent medical practitioners from giving legal advice to seek the opinion of non-medical fatwa committees in complex cases involving abortion.

28. It had been reported that, while health care had become more equal and fairer across Maldives, some services, including gynaecology, were unavailable on the outer atolls and some patients had died as a result. She hoped to hear what measures had been taken to decentralize and develop health-care services on the outer atolls, in order to ensure equal and easier access to health care, in particular for women and girls. She also wished to know what steps had been taken to ensure proper accountability of and training for health-care providers in respect of patient confidentiality.

29. Lastly, she wondered if the delegation could explain why the percentage of babies delivered by caesarean section had increased from 32 to 40 per cent between 2009 and 2016, when most countries had a level of between 10 and 15 per cent, and what measures the State party was taking to address that increase.

30. **Ms. Azza** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that certain specific aspects of education on sexual and reproductive health and family planning were currently taught at all levels of the curriculum, while others had yet to be incorporated into content taught to adolescents from 14 to 18 years of age. The areas of values, attitudes and sources of sexual learning, and of sexuality and the media, were covered to some extent; the area of gender-based violence, including sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful practices, was not yet covered.

31. **Ms. Aishath Mohamed Didi** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that, in view of the sensitivity of such issues in Maldives, inclusion of those subjects in the curriculum represented a major step forward. The Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services would work closely with higher education institutions to support the curriculum change, in order to help teachers to follow best practice while teaching those subjects.

32. **Mr. Mahir** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that the Ministry of Health had made the Health Sector Response to Gender-based Violence guidelines available to all health-care facilities. Those facilities' staff also underwent online training, which included specific modules on gender-based violence. Foreign doctors applying to work on the islands had to pass an examination, which also included questions on gender-based violence. More detailed, specific courses on the subject had also been held. The health-care system was moving from a curative to a preventive model, under which each island would have, in addition to doctors and nurses, social services and mental health professionals, who would work with the community; it was hoped that they would be able to identify issues such as gender-based violence.

33. Data on unsafe abortions could not be provided because such abortions were not recorded in Maldives. The fact that the use of caesarean sections was increasing more rapidly than in the rest of the world was a multifactorial problem. While every island had a delivery room, there was sometimes no doctor available to deliver a baby. Moreover, prenatal care, including ultrasound scans, was unavailable on some islands. However, the Government was working on decentralizing the health-care system into five regions, in which all small communities were linked to a tertiary care centre to which patients could be referred. Furthermore, the country's universal health insurance enabled patients to access private health care.

34. **Ms. Aishath Mohamed Didi** (Maldives), outlining the circumstances in which safe medical abortions were permitted under the fatwa of 2013, said that medical practitioners did follow the guidance issued by the non-medical fatwa committee. The authorities went to great lengths to ensure the safety and protection of the woman or girl undergoing such an abortion.

35. **Mr. Thayyib** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that the Family Protection Authority was responsible for building the capacities of health-care professionals, law enforcement personnel and social workers to respond to cases of domestic violence and gender-based violence. Under normal circumstances, three annual workshops were conducted on different atolls to provide information on identifying domestic violence,

referral mechanisms and how to respond to such cases. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the workshops had not taken place in 2020 or most of 2021, but one was scheduled for November 2021. A handbook on risk assessment had been distributed to service providers, including health-care professionals, across the country in 2020.

36. **Ms. Aishath Mohamed Didi** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that, in order to address the issue of exorcism and black magic, scholars from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs regularly visited the atolls to conduct lectures explaining the correct teachings of Islam and to answer questions from the general public.

37. **Mr. Shameem** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that, since exorcism was a traditional medical practice, it was not regulated. Criminal charges were brought if malpractice or exploitation in the name of exorcism or black magic was identified, however. One perpetrator of exorcism practices exploiting children, women or other vulnerable groups had already been prosecuted in 2021, with a further two currently under investigation.

38. **Mr. Riffath** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that, although the Government had produced draft amendments to the Penal Code that would criminalize female genital mutilation, further consultation with the public and with relevant stakeholders was required before the amendments could be sent to parliament. The Government could not control how long it would take for the bill to be tabled and then complete the committee stages, but the amendments would be prioritized on the Government's agenda.

39. **Ms. Stott Despoja** said that, while she understood that the legislative process could be time-consuming, it would be useful to hear the details of the amendment bill and of the process of consulting with stakeholders and others. It would also be helpful to know what steps the Government was taking to increase awareness of and education on female genital mutilation, from both the religious and the health perspectives. She would welcome clarification of the specific time frame for the roll-out of modules on sexual and reproductive health and family planning for adolescents from 14 to 18 years of age. She would appreciate further details of the multifactorial issues mentioned by the delegation in relation to the large number of caesarean sections and of the steps being taken to address some of the problems mentioned in that connection. Finally, she hoped that, when conducting future statistical surveys, the State party would consider producing disaggregated data on the age and geographical location of women undergoing unsafe and illegal abortions.

40. **Ms. Bethel**, referring to ILO figures showing that the female labour participation rate in Maldives had increased from 20 to 44 per cent since 1990, said that she wished to know what specific policies and measures were in place to ensure that, instead of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic rolling back those gains, women's labour participation rate could further increase. She wondered what incentives and strategies were in place to encourage women's participation in the blue economy and in financial services.

41. She asked what policies and programmes were in place to assist women with small businesses in overcoming obstacles to earning a reasonable income; whether the legal and operational framework necessary to increase women's entrepreneurship had been established with the involvement of the Maldives Monetary Authority; what steps the Business Centre Corporation had taken to increase women's entrepreneurship and improve their access to finance; and how many women had benefited from those initiatives and in which economic sectors they operated. She would appreciate it if the delegation could share the findings of the technical feasibility study on the international marketability of traditional Maldivian products and comment on how the Ministry of Economic Development assisted women in marketing and exporting their products. She would welcome specific information on the State party's plans to expand affordable care for children, older adults and the sick, in order to reduce women's unpaid care work.

42. She would welcome detailed information on the evaluation of social protection schemes that supported women heads of households and those working in the informal sector, including food subsidies and disability allowances, and asked how the State party intended to protect vulnerable women from the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. She also wished to know how social benefits, including pensions, were provided to poor women and those who did not contribute to the tax system, and how the 33 per cent quota for women in local council elections had helped integrate the gender perspective into poverty eradication

policies. She would welcome information on the findings of a gender impact analysis of the State party's tax reforms and on how regressive consumption taxes had affected vulnerable women, especially those below the poverty line. Had the imposition of those taxes on women, particularly poor women, been assessed prior to their implementation?

43. **Ms. Imad** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that the Business Centre Corporation assisted in implementing policies aimed at small and medium-sized enterprises. The Corporation managed four duty-free shops that provided a low-cost forum in which local producers could sell their products; more than 50 per cent of them were women. Work was also being done to promote their products in international markets. The Corporation organized events to mark International Home-Based Workers Day and had set up a kitchen that could be used by entrepreneurs for food production, along with food production training. More than 600 women had received training in business registration in 2021.

44. The SME Development Finance Corporation worked with other Government agencies to identify vulnerable groups and facilitate their access to finance through grants and credit facilities on favourable terms, with women among the priority groups. It also provided online information sessions on the financing opportunities that it offered. Maldivians on remote islands could apply for credit via one of the Business Centre Corporation's 14 island officers.

45. **Ms. Aishath Mohamed Didi** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that the Ministry of Fisheries, Marine Resources and Agriculture and the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services had also established loan programmes. No discrimination against women existed in law or in practice in relation to the registration of land or assets in women's names or their ability to purchase machinery and equipment. Indeed, there had been cases of men fraudulently carrying out such transactions and accessing credit in women's names, and awareness of that issue was raised during training and discussion sessions. Much work had been undertaken to protect the most vulnerable from the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

46. Applications for all forms of social protection could be made directly to the National Social Protection Agency or via local councils. A large proportion of applicants over the previous two years had been women with families, and the online application system had been improved in response to the COVID-19 pandemic; Internet access was available throughout Maldives. Work was also being done with the Local Government Authority to link data-collection and monitoring mechanisms for vulnerable groups. Social protection measures included the Single Parent Allowance; the Foster Parent Allowance; the Food Subsidy Programme, which had benefited an increased number of recipients during the COVID-19 pandemic; and the disability allowance, classification for which had recently been updated with the assistance of the World Health Organization. The fostering process had recently been formalized and involved an independent committee that scrutinized applications, as well as the court system.

47. **Ms. Bethel** said that she wished to encourage the State party to consider how opportunities for women in the blue economy and the financial services sector could facilitate their economic participation. She asked whether the State party had examined the feasibility of establishing cooperatives for home-based women workers in the informal sector.

48. **Ms. Bonifaz Alfonzo** said that both the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change had a specific impact on rural women in Maldives, who suffered discrimination particularly in access to public services. She asked whether the National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2020–2022 comprised differentiated policies and strategies for rural women, including in terms of the generation of employment. She also wished to know what specific measures had been taken to address violence against women in rural areas and whether disaggregated data on rural women was collected.

49. **Ms. Peláez Narváez** asked what measures the State party had adopted to guarantee access to health care, particularly sexual and reproductive health, as well as education, employment, specialized services to address violence, and justice by women who had disabilities, women who were members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex community, women who were members of ethnic minority groups, migrant women, foreign women and non-Muslim women.

50. She wished to know what steps had been taken to combat the stigmatization and marginalization of lesbian, bisexual and transgender women and to close the gap between the number of women and men with disabilities who applied for the disability allowance. She asked whether the State party planned to abolish provisions that allowed the legal representatives of persons with mental disabilities to give consent for surgical sterilization on their behalf, and how it protected residents at the Home for People with Special Needs from abuse and harmful practices. Lastly, she asked what was being done to ensure that all women with disabilities in Maldives could take any decision regarding their human rights and fundamental freedoms, and how many had accessed justice.

51. **Ms. Aishath Mohamed Didi** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that the Strategic Action Plan did not differentiate between rural women and others. The Government's decentralization policy aimed to standardize services across the country, with no discrimination between women and men.

52. The Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services and the Prosecutor General's Office collected disaggregated data on domestic violence against women in rural areas. Every atoll had a Family and Children's Services Centre, operated by the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services, with social workers and administrative staff. Those centres ensured the monthly collection of statistics and shared them with the Island Councils, to further their understanding of the vulnerabilities of women and children on the islands. National data was also collected monthly and used to inform decision-making.

53. Community social groups were being introduced in every island as a multisectoral mechanism to prevent and respond to violence against children and other vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities. The groups would identify and assess the most vulnerable families, collect data and provide referrals to protection services. They would also work for the promotion, protection and fulfilment of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Groups would include a representative of the Island Council, the school, the police, the health centre or hospital, the Juvenile Justice Unit, the Women's Development Committee, and the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services, if present on that atoll. Some islands had already started training staff, and trainers who would be dispatched to the islands also receiving training.

54. Men and women with disabilities received the same care and services. As of May 2021, there were approximately 3,880 registered women with disabilities, out of a total of almost 9,000 registered persons with disabilities. Fewer women than men with disabilities claimed disability allowance, possibly because women with disabilities were typically cared for by their siblings or children, but comprehensive studies were needed to explore the situation of women with disabilities. The law did not discriminate against women of religions other than Islam.

55. The Home for People with Special Needs housed 74 women and 125 men. Fewer than 30 of those residents were older persons, and 3 were registered as persons with disabilities – 1 of whom was a woman. The majority of residents were psychiatric patients, men and women were segregated, and care was provided by trained care workers. The home was monitored by a number of bodies, including the national human rights institution, which made frequent visits and recommendations for improvements, and NGOs that provided services at the home. Representatives of the World Health Organization had also visited the home.

56. **Ms. Peláez Narváez** said that she wished to know whether the State party provided the special arrangements needed for women with reduced mobility to access screening for breast and uterine cancer. She asked whether migrant women were also able to access such screening.

57. **Mr. Mahir** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that all islands provided access to cervical screening programmes, with samples sent to tertiary centres for analysis. Mammography and X-rays were only available at the secondary care level, to which referrals could be made from all islands.

Articles 15 and 16

58. **Ms. Narain** said that the reservation to paragraph 1 subsections (a), (c), (d) and (f) of article 16 of the Convention was a cause of serious concern and asked the delegation to explain the reasons behind it. She wished to know who was conducting the review of family law that would consider the matter, how many women and religious representatives were involved in the review, and whether stakeholders such as women's advocacy organizations, judges, law practitioners and academics would be able to make representations to the review.

59. Information on the reasons behind the high divorce rate in the State party would be appreciated, as would details of whether divorcing women had legal representation and whether they were entitled to legal aid in divorce, custody and maintenance cases. She asked whether women on outlying islands and atolls had adequate access to legal and court services, particularly in urgent situations. It would also be interesting to know whether women were entitled to legal aid to enforce prenuptial agreements, how it was ensured that women did not sign away their rights on marriage, and whether there were plans to conduct a study of the economic consequences of divorce for both spouses, in keeping with the Committee's general recommendation No. 29 (2013).

60. She wished to know how the prohibition of marriage for those under 18 years old was enforced in practice and whether awareness of the issue was raised among religious and community leaders, and schoolgirls. Details of the support provided to girls who had already entered into child marriages would be useful. Information on the State party's plans and timeline for prohibiting polygamy and details of whether it was discouraged by the authorities and in the media would be appreciated. Information on how the universal registration of marriage was ensured would also be welcome. She wished to know what measures were in place to ensure that the rights of women in polygamous marriages were respected, particularly with regard to children and their economic rights within marriage and after its termination.

61. **Ms. Fayyaz** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that the review of family law would be led by an international consultant, in cooperation with the Attorney General, the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services, and other stakeholder institutions. The recommendations for reform were likely to focus on the solemnization and registration of marriages, including polygamous marriages, and divorce, child custody, the division of assets, and spousal and child support. The reform was intended to provide a modern family law system that protected and promoted women's and girls' human and constitutional rights.

62. Section 14 of the Special Provisions Act to Deal with Child Sex Abuse Offenders had effectively been repealed by the establishment, in the Child Rights Protection Act, of 18 years as the age of marriage. Child marriages could not be registered after the enactment of the Child Rights Protection Act in November 2019; no child marriages had been registered since 2016.

63. **Mr. Shameem** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that any person who married a child or had a sexual relationship with a child in the guise of an undocumented marriage had committed a criminal offence and would be prosecuted.

64. **Ms. Rizna** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that women on the islands could access justice through the magistrate courts – which had been established on all inhabited islands and had resident magistrates – or through online services. There were no restrictions on dealing with family law matters using audio or video conferencing. The upward trend in case numbers in recent years, particularly for divorce or domestic violence, indicated that there had been improvements in access to justice. In addition, the backlog of family law cases pending before the magistrate courts was decreasing.

65. **Mr. Riffath** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that the Constitution provided that the Government should offer legal aid to persons accused of serious offences who could not afford to engage a lawyer. The Juvenile Justice Act mandated the State provision of legal aid to children who had been detained or arrested, irrespective of their means or the type of offence they were suspected of having committed. Any party involved in proceedings under the Domestic Violence Act was entitled to representation by a lawyer, provided by the State on request. The Attorney General's Office was responsible for the provision of State-funded

legal aid, regardless of an applicant's geographical location. A legal aid bill was being drafted to establish a separate service for the provision of legal aid to individuals who could not afford legal representation and to tackle other issues, including the poor availability of lawyers on the atolls. The Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services had an arrangement with a civil society organization that provided free legal aid to victims of domestic or gender-based violence, on referral from the Ministry.

66. **Ms. Aishath Mohamed Didi** (Maldives), speaking via video link, said that she wished to thank the Committee for the constructive dialogue that had taken place. Her Government remained resolute in its plans to transform the situation of women's rights and looked forward to receiving the Committee's concluding observations on its sixth periodic report.

67. **The Chair** said that she wished to thank the delegation for the further insights they had provided on the situation of women in Maldives.

The meeting rose at 12.30 p.m.