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Gender Equality in the Maldives: Bridging Legal Provisions, Lived Realities and International Standards

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ABSTRACT

Gender equality remains a significant human rights and development challenge in the Maldives, notwithstanding constitutional guarantees, legislative measures and international commitments. The paper examines the gap between formal legal equality and the lived realities of Maldivian women. It argues that equal legal status does not automatically ensure substantive equality, because women continue to face disadvantages arising from patriarchal social norms, institutional practices, gender-based violence, unequal economic opportunity, limited political representation and restricted access to decision-making spaces. Seemingly gender-neutral laws and policies may also produce unequal outcomes, because public institutions and social structures have historically been shaped around male experience and male patterns of participation. The study sets the constitutional and statutory framework governing gender equality in the Maldives against relevant international standards, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the broader United Nations human rights framework and Sustainable Development Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda. It further explores how cultural expectation, religious interpretation, geographical dispersion and institutional limitation affect women's ability to exercise legally recognised rights in practice. The paper adopts a doctrinal and socio-legal approach, drawing on legal provisions, policy documents, international instruments and available evidence concerning women's social, political and economic participation. Its empirical element rests on three questionnaires administered to working, educated officers of the Maldives (36 male respondents, 63 female respondents and 13 respondents who did not disclose their gender identity), in which participants assigned a range of social and occupational roles to a gender category. The paper concludes that bridging the divide between law and reality requires more than legislative recognition. Effective enforcement mechanisms, gender-responsive institutions, improved access to justice, public awareness, reliable gender-disaggregated data and the meaningful participation of women in governance are essential. Harmonising domestic practice with international standards can enable the Maldives to move from formal equality towards genuine, inclusive and substantive gender justice.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Despite constitutional guarantees, statutory protections and international commitments, gender equality often remains more aspirational than actual. Men and women enjoy equal legal status in many jurisdictions, the Maldives among them, yet equality before the law does not necessarily translate into equality in everyday life. Social attitudes, institutional practices and entrenched cultural norms continue to shape unequal opportunities, expectations and outcomes for women. This divergence between legal rights and social realities forms the central challenge in achieving substantive gender equality.

Gender inequality is rarely confined to explicit discrimination; it is frequently embedded within institutions and systems designed around male experience and male standards. Many workplace practices, public policies and social structures are presented as neutral, yet they often reflect male patterns of work, mobility and participation. Women consequently encounter structural disadvantages that become normalised and are seldom questioned. Whether in employment, public spaces, healthcare, scientific research or product design, institutional frameworks have historically prioritised male needs while marginalising women's experience. Such systemic bias illustrates that formal legal equality alone cannot eliminate gender disparity without corresponding change in social norms and institutional practice.

The persistence of these inequalities has been acknowledged at the international level, where gender equality has moved from a developmental aspiration to a core human rights and sustainable development objective. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015) recognised gender equality as a key development priority, but their limited approach contributed to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNITED NATIONS, 2015). Under the Sustainable Development Goals, and particularly Goal 5, gender equality is treated as a prerequisite for inclusive, equitable and sustainable development, requiring equal rights, opportunities and participation for women and men, and progress towards it conditions progress across the remaining goals (UN WOMEN, 2018).

Against this backdrop, the present study examines gender equality in the Maldives by reading the country's legal commitments against empirical evidence of social attitude. The doctrinal element considers the constitutional guarantees of non-discrimination and of equality before the law, the statutory framework built upon them, and the international obligations the Maldives has assumed, principally under the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of*

Discrimination against Women. The empirical element draws on three questionnaires administered to Maldivian officers, which asked respondents to assign a range of social and occupational roles to a gender category. Setting the two against each other allows an assessment of how far law has displaced traditional gender norms, and of where formal guarantee and lived perception continue to diverge. The comparison reported here is between groups of respondents rather than between countries: no Indian dataset was collected, and the findings are not offered as a comparative empirical study of India and the Maldives.

II. LIVED REALITIES AND LEGAL PROVISIONS

A study was conducted using three questionnaires which asked respondents from the Maldives to classify a range of roles as male, female or transgender, so as to evaluate gendered perceptions of different social and professional roles. The respondents were officers whom the authors describe as Class I officers, and comprised men, women and those who chose not to disclose their gender identity. Most roles were classified as male or female, but some respondents associated certain roles with the third gender. In a few cases respondents assigned no category to a role, while in others the same role was listed simultaneously under two categories. The three questionnaires did not present an identical set of roles, so some roles discussed below came principally from one questionnaire and were absent from the other two. Only roles that attracted clear and sufficient responses have been retained. For the purposes of analysis, roles common to all three questionnaires, together with those appearing in at least two, were selected; roles that showed no clear preference or attracted inadequate responses were left out of the final analysis.

On the basis of the responses obtained, respondents were grouped according to their gender identity, which allows a clearer view of societal perception. The analysis is accordingly divided into three parts: the questionnaire completed by male respondents; the questionnaire completed by female respondents; and the questionnaire completed by respondents who preferred not to disclose their gender identity.

The three questionnaires were completed by working, educated officers of the Maldives: 36 male respondents (Study I), 63 female respondents (Study II) and 13 respondents who did not disclose their gender identity, giving 112 participants in all. The paper does not record how respondents were approached or how the questionnaires were distributed. Respondents were not drawn at random from the Maldivian population but from a single occupational stratum, and, as noted above, the three instruments did not list an identical set of roles. Because a respondent could assign the same role to more than one gender category, the responses recorded

against a role may exceed the number of respondents in that group. The findings therefore describe the perceptions of the officers surveyed. They are not a national sample, no test of statistical significance was undertaken, and they should not be read as representative of Maldivian society at large.

A. Study I: Male respondents

i. Overall gender assignment across all roles

Taken across all fourteen roles, male respondents assigned a little over half of their responses to the male category, a little under half to the female category, and a negligible share to the transgender category.

Category assigned	Responses	Share of all responses
Male	170	54.5%
Female	136	43.6%
Transgender	6	1.9%
Total	312	100%

Table 1: Overall distribution of role assignments by male respondents (Study I, $n = 36$). Figures are the sums of the role-level counts reported in Table 7.

B. Study II: Female respondents

Among female respondents the distribution across all fourteen roles was close to even between the male and female categories, with a smaller share again assigned to the transgender category.

Category assigned	Responses	Share of all responses
Male	248	50.9%
Female	236	48.5%
Transgender	3	0.6%
Total	487	100%

Table 2: Overall distribution of role assignments by female respondents (Study II, $n = 63$). Figures are the sums of the role-level counts reported in Table 7.

C. Study I: Gender stereotypes by occupation

Classifying each of the fourteen occupations by the category that predominated, male respondents treated ten of them as male dominated, three as female dominated and one as balanced.

Perceived dominance	Share of the fourteen occupations
Male dominated	71%
Female dominated	21%

Perceived dominance	Share of the fourteen occupations
Balanced	8%

Table 3: Distribution of the fourteen occupations by perceived gender dominance, Study I (male respondents, $n = 36$).

D. Study II: Gender stereotypes by occupation

The same classification applied to the responses of female respondents produces a less lopsided distribution, with fewer occupations read as male dominated and more read as balanced.

Perceived dominance	Share of the fourteen occupations
Male dominated	57%
Female dominated	29%
Balanced	14%

Table 4: Distribution of the fourteen occupations by perceived gender dominance, Study II (female respondents, $n = 63$).

E. Occupations most often assigned to men

The occupations most frequently assigned to the male category in both studies were those involving physical strength, technical skill, mobility or risk.

Occupation	Study I	Study II
Cyber criminal	23	37
Bus driver	17	39
Firefighter	14	23
Mechanic	11	17
Pilot	11	11

Table 5: Occupations most often assigned to the male category, by number of responses.

F. Occupations most often assigned to women

The occupations most frequently assigned to the female category were concentrated in care, nurture and teaching, with the single exception of taxi or car driving in Study II.

Occupation	Study I	Study II
Nurse	34	58
Home caregiver	30	47
Teacher	26	50
Taxi driver or car driver	1	20

Table 6: Occupations most often assigned to the female category, by number of responses.

G. Comparative role-assignment data

Table 7 brings the two studies together role by role. It records, for each of the fourteen roles, the number of respondents in each study who assigned that role to the male, female or transgender category, together with the authors' characterisation of the perception that predominated.

Role or function	Study I: male	Study I: female	Study I: transgender	Study II: male	Study II: female	Study II: transgender	Dominant perception
Teacher	20	26	2	23	50	1	Strongly female
Teenager	5	8	0	13	10	0	Mixed
Bus driver	17	8	0	39	4	0	Strongly male
Conductor	10	4	0	22	1	0	Strongly male
Security guard	9	5	0	11	12	0	Balanced
Nurse	14	34	1	11	58	1	Strongly female
Emergency services (firefighter)	14	4	1	23	6	0	Strongly male
Taxi driver or car driver	11	1	0	4	20	0	Shift towards female
Cyber criminal	23	8	2	37	8	1	Strongly male
Pilot	11	1	0	11	6	0	Male
Mechanic	11	1	0	17	0	0	Very strongly male
Prime minister	10	1	0	14	4	0	Male
Home care taker	8	30	0	15	47	0	Female
Boss or senior	7	5	0	8	10	0	Nearly balanced
Total responses	170	136	6	248	236	3	

Table 7: Comparative role-assignment data, Study I (male respondents, $n = 36$) and Study II (female respondents, $n = 63$). The total row states the arithmetic sums of the columns.

H. Comparative overview of the two studies

Study I (male respondents). Male respondents exhibited stronger occupational gender stereotyping. Leadership, transport, technical, emergency and political roles were

predominantly assigned to men, whereas caregiving and educational roles were associated with women. Recognition of transgender individuals was minimal, indicating a persistently binary perception of occupational roles.

Study II (female respondents). Respondents continued to associate nursing, teaching and caregiving with women, and technical or leadership roles with men. Perceptions of the security guard and the boss or senior were nonetheless more balanced, and taxi driving showed a notable shift towards female representation. Overall, Study II reflects a gradual movement towards more inclusive perception, although traditional gender stereotypes remain influential.

The Study I columns of Table 7 record the distribution of roles that male respondents associated with the male, female and transgender categories. They show that men were more inclined to the view that occupations involving physical strength or technical expertise, such as bus driver, emergency services (firefighter), pilot, mechanic, taxi driver and cyber criminal, are male dominated, whereas caregiving and nurturing occupations were strongly associated with women. Nursing shows the most pronounced gendered perception: a majority of male respondents (34 responses) identified it as a female occupation, against 14 responses associating it with men. The role of home care taker was likewise perceived as female dominated (30 responses) rather than male (8 responses), and teaching was seen as predominantly female (26 responses), although a considerable number of male responses (20) also fell in that category.

Some occupations reflect mixed perception. Security guard (9 male, 5 female) and conductor (10 male, 4 female) were associated by men with both genders rather than dominated by one. Leadership-oriented roles such as prime minister and boss or senior nonetheless attracted more responses for men.

Male respondents made little use of the transgender category. It recorded responses only for teacher (2), cyber criminal (2), nurse (1) and emergency services (1), and was disregarded entirely for the remaining occupations.

The Study I responses therefore favour traditional gender stereotypes, in which roles demanding leadership or physical strength are linked with men and caregiving roles with women. The transgender category receives minimal recognition and is largely excluded from occupational perception.

I. Questionnaire completed by female respondents

Sixty-three female respondents completed the second questionnaire. Table 8 sets out the distribution of roles they attributed to the male, female and transgender categories.

Role or function	Male	Female	Transgender	Observation
Teacher	23	50	1	Female respondents more often assigned teaching to their own gender.
Teenager	13	10	0	The teenager role was assigned slightly more often to males than to females.
Bus driver	39	4	0	The role was mainly assigned to males, with few females in this position.
Conductor	22	1	0	The conductor role was mainly assigned to males.
Security guard	11	12	0	Male and female assignments were almost equal.
Nurse	11	58	1	Nursing was mostly assigned to females, with little representation in other categories.
Emergency services (firefighter)	23	6	0	The role was mainly assigned to males.
Taxi driver or car driver	4	20	0	This role attracted more assignments for females than for males.
Cyber criminal	37	8	1	The role was mostly assigned to males.
Pilot	11	6	0	The pilot role was assigned more often to males than to females.
Mechanic	17	0	0	The mechanic role was assigned entirely to males.
Prime minister	14	4	0	Political leadership was mostly assigned to males.
Home care taker	15	47	0	The role was primarily assigned to females.
Boss or senior	8	10	0	Assignments were relatively balanced, with slightly more females.

Table 8: Role assignments by female respondents (Study II, n = 63).

Table 8 shows that female respondents largely align with male respondents in treating caregiving and nurturing occupations as female. Nursing recorded 58 responses in favour of women against 11 in favour of men; teaching recorded 50 female to 23 male responses; and home care taking recorded 47 female to 15 male responses.

In occupations requiring physical strength, technical expertise or mobility, however, female respondents did not hold the male-dominated view as firmly. For some roles their responses indicate a shift in perception: security guard attracted 12 female responses to 11 male, and car driver 20 female responses to 4 male. Other such occupations were still viewed as male dominated: bus driver (4 female, 39 male), conductor (1 female, 22 male), emergency services (6 female, 23 male), pilot (6 female, 11 male) and mechanic (0 female, 17 male).

In the political sphere, female respondents continued to place women below men: the role of prime minister attracted only 4 responses in favour of women against 14 in favour of men. Where leadership was framed more generally, however, they placed women at least on a par with men, the role of boss recording 10 responses in favour of women against 8 for men.

Female respondents gave even less recognition to the transgender category than male respondents did, recording only three such responses in all.

J. Questionnaire completed by respondents who did not disclose their gender identity

Thirteen respondents completed the questionnaire without disclosing their gender identity. Their role assignments are set out in Table 9. Because this group is small, its results are reported for completeness rather than as an independent basis for inference.

Role or function	Male	Female	Transgender	Observation
Teacher	2	11	0	The teaching role was assigned more often to females than to males.
Teenager	8	3	0	The teenager role was mostly given to males.
Bus driver	11	1	0	Most respondents linked the bus driver role with males.
Conductor	10	2	0	The conductor role was mainly assigned to males.
Security guard	6	5	0	The number of male and female assignments was almost equal.

Role or function	Male	Female	Transgender	Observation
Nurse	0	13	0	The nursing role was assigned only to females.
Emergency services (firefighter)	5	1	0	Most emergency service roles were linked to males.
Taxi driver or car driver	7	0	0	The role was given only to males.
Cyber criminal	1	1	0	Male and female assignments were equal.
Pilot	1	0	0	The pilot role was assigned only to males.
Mechanic	1	0	0	The mechanic role was given exclusively to males.
Prime minister	1	0	0	Political leadership roles were assigned only to males.
Home care taker	2	4	0	The caregiving role was assigned more often to females.
Boss or senior	1	0	0	Leadership roles were assigned only to males.

Table 9: Role assignments by respondents who did not disclose their gender identity ($n = 13$).

Table 9 shows that respondents who did not disclose their identity were inclined to the view that occupations involving authority, physical strength or technical expertise, namely bus driver, conductor, emergency services (firefighter), taxi driver and security guard, are male dominated, while caregiving and nurturing occupations were largely associated with women. Nursing again shows the most pronounced gendered perception, with all 13 responses identifying it as a female occupation and none associating it with men. Teaching was likewise perceived as predominantly female (11 responses) rather than male (2 responses).

Some roles appeared relatively neutral to this group. Cyber criminal, for example, attracted equal responses for men and women. Other technical or leadership-oriented roles, such as pilot, mechanic and prime minister, attracted very few responses overall but were still associated slightly more with men than with women.

None of these respondents linked any role to the transgender category.

Despite the Maldives' constitutional and statutory guarantees of gender equality, the findings of these questionnaires reveal the persistence of gender stereotypes. Respondents of both genders

held stereotypical role expectations in relation to political leadership, caregiving responsibility and professional competence. Female respondents showed slightly greater flexibility, but the broader pattern still supports conventional male dominance. The minimal recognition given to transgender people points to their limited social acceptance. These results suggest that however firmly equality is pronounced in law, social norms remain deeply embedded, and that law alone cannot dismantle ingrained bias without social awareness and cultural engagement alongside it.

III. CONCLUSION

The present study indicates that gender equality in the Maldives reflects a complex interaction between legal provision and deeply embedded social reality. Gender bias is neither incidental nor recent; it is an entrenched social construct that has shaped societies across historical periods, and such beliefs are also present in the Maldives. The Maldives has built a substantial legal framework for women's rights, resting on the constitutional guarantee that rights and freedoms are enjoyed without discrimination of any kind, including sex, and that every individual is equal before and under the law (Constitution of the Republic of Maldives, 2008, arts. 17, 20), and developed through the Domestic Violence Prevention Act 2012 and the Gender Equality Act 2016. Discrimination against women nonetheless persists across several sectors.

The same pattern appears in the country's treaty commitments. The Maldives acceded to the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* on 1 July 1993 subject to reservations founded on the principles of Islamic Sharia. It withdrew its reservation to article 7(a) on 31 March 2010, and in February 2020 withdrew its reservations to article 16(1) (b), (e), (g) and (h) and to article 16(2); reservations to article 16(1)(a), (c), (d) and (f), which concern marriage and family relations, remain in place (UNITED NATIONS TREATY COLLECTION, n.d.; MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT, 2024).

The Maldives has made substantial progress in education and health, while women continue to face disadvantage in labour force participation, earnings and political representation. Girls record a higher net enrolment rate than boys at primary level (98.3% against 95.4%) and at higher secondary level (24.4% against 17.5%), women accounted for 62% of enrolment in local higher education institutions between 2019 and 2022, and more than 99% of births are attended by a health professional. Against this, women's labour force participation stood at 48.4% in the 2022 census compared with 79.5% for men, employed women earned an average of MVR 7,995 a month against MVR 12,169 for men, and only three of the ninety-three members returned to the People's Majlis in April 2024 were women (MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT, 2024). Gender dynamics in the Maldives are further complicated by foreign

labour migration, the geographic dispersion of the islands and the financial dependence of women.

The questionnaires used in this study illustrate that, despite formal legal guarantees, stereotypical expectation remains central to gender bias within the country. Female respondents viewed traditional male-dominated roles with comparatively greater flexibility, admitting female participation in some of them, but the broader spectrum reveals that most respondents, women included, still tend to support male dominance. The minimal recognition of the transgender category is a further indicator of limited acceptance, which narrows gender diversity within the Maldives.

The gap between legal commitment and societal attitude can be closed only through greater social awareness, improved representation for under-represented gender groups in the economic and political spheres, and targeted programmes of social advancement. Gender-neutral language can also be adopted to reshape social perception, for instance police officer in place of policeman, or chairperson in place of chairman. If social attitudes are refined alongside legal commitments, the result can be not only gender justice but wider economic growth. Reducing gender inequality matters not only as a goal of women's empowerment but also for economic efficiency, productivity and environmental sustainability (UN WOMEN, 2018).

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