Ocean Country Partnership Programme

GESI and SEAH Status Report for the Maldives

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Ocean Country Partnership Programme: The Ocean Country Partnership Programme (OCPP) is a bilateral technical assistance and capacity building programme that provides tailored support to countries to manage the marine environment more sustainably, including by strengthening marine science expertise, developing science-based policy and management tools and creating educational resources for coastal communities. The OCPP delivers work under three thematic areas: biodiversity, marine pollution, and sustainable seafood.

Contents

Executive Summary

This report serves as a foundational guide for the the Ocean Country Partnership Programme （OCPP） in enhancing Gender Equality and Social Inclusion （GESI） sensitivity and Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment （SEAH） awareness within their efforts in the Maldives. Recognizing the program's central focus on biodiversity conservation and marine pollution management, this report integrates a comprehensive analysis tailored to inform these objectives.

Structured to address the diverse needs of coastal communities, the report examines systemic barriers to inclusion, identifies key gender and social vulnerabilities, and evaluates existing initiatives in the Maldives. It provides actionable recommendations to ensure that OCPP's work is both inclusive and aligned with the realities of the Maldivian context. The analysis aligns with the objectives of the report:

- Identifying the Most Vulnerable Populations: Section 3 （"Most Vulnerable Groups in the Maldives" provides an in-depth exploration of groups disproportionately affected by socio-economic, environmental, and institutional vulnerabilities, including women, persons with disabilities, migrant workers, the elderly, and youth.

- Analyzing Gender Issues in Coastal Communities: Gender inequalities and intersectional vulnerabilities, particularly in rural and coastal areas, are addressed comprehensively in Section 3 and elaborated under "Gender Inequality Intersectionalities."

- Reviewing Existing Work on Poverty and Vulnerability: Section 6 （"Existing Initiatives with GESI and SEAH Considerations in the Environment Sector"） highlights ongoing projects aimed at addressing poverty, environmental degradation, and vulnerability, drawing lessons applicable to OCPP's objectives.

- Empowering Women and Addressing Gender Inequality: Recommendations in Section 8 emphasize community-based engagement, capacity-building initiatives, and inclusive economic opportunities that empower women and mitigate gender disparities.

- Utilizing Available Data for GESI Analysis: Section 2 ("Methodology and Framework") details the data sources and tools used, including the GESI and SEAH Assessment Questionnaire, which translates international frameworks into actionable indicators.

- Identifying SEAH Risks in the Maldives: Section 4 ("SEAH Risk Analysis") evaluates the systemic risks and challenges related to SEAH, providing targeted strategies to mitigate these vulnerabilities.

The report's findings and recommendations align with OCPPs mission to deliver technical assistance on biodiversity and marine pollution in the Maldives. By integrating GESI principles and SEAH safeguards, this document offers a roadmap for inclusive and effective management of marine resources, ensuring that all stakeholders, particularly marginalized and vulnerable groups, are actively involved in and benefit from conservation efforts.

1. Introduction

The Maldives is a nation entirely defined by its coastal identity, consisting of 1,192 islands spread across 26 natural atolls, with a total land area of approximately 298 square kilometers. Unlike countries with distinct inland regions, the Maldives is entirely coastal, with every island directly exposed to the ocean. This unique geography shapes the nation's existence, as islands are subject to coastal dynamics such as erosion, sea-level rise, and storm surges. The economy, culture, and livelihoods are profoundly tied to the surrounding ocean, with coral reefs and lagoons providing critical natural protection and supporting key sectors such as tourism and fisheries (Asian Development Bank, Multi-Hazard Risk Atlas of Maldives, 2020).

Fig 1. Maldives Map

The 2022 Maldives Census reported a population of 515,122, comprising 382,751 Maldivians and 132,371 foreigners (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, Population Census 2022 Report). Women make up 48% of the population, yet gender disparities persist in employment and political representation. Malé, the capital city, houses 41% of the population within just 5.8 square kilometers, reflecting extreme urban density. In contrast, over 75% of inhabited islands remain rural, facing challenges such as limited access to essential services, disaster preparedness, and economic opportunities. This urban-rural divide is exacerbated by internal migration trends, with resources concentrated in Malé while atoll communities, where 93% of the nation's poor reside, face greater vulnerabilities to poverty and climate risks (World Bank, Maldives Country Environmental Analysis: Key Highlights, 2023).

Poverty statistics reveal stark disparities: at the international poverty line of $5.5 PPP per person per day, 1.7% of the population is classified as poor, all residing in the atolls. At the national poverty line of MVR 71.4 per person per day, 5.4% of the population is poor, with nearly all of them located outside Malé (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, Poverty and Inequality in Maldives, 2022). In the atolls, poverty is compounded by limited infrastructure and opportunities, while in Malé, deprivation takes the form of overcrowding and high housing costs, with households spending up to 37% of their annual expenditures on rent (Asian Development Bank, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in South Asia, 2023).

Transportation within and between islands is a lifeline for daily life, particularly in the dispersed geography of the Maldives. While boats, speed ferries, and domestic flights form the backbone of the transport system, these options remain infrequent and costly for rural island communities. Dependence on Malé for healthcare, education, and essential services further deepens the urban-rural divide, leaving outer islands isolated and underserved (Asian Development Bank, Multi-Hazard Risk Atlas of Maldives, 2020).

The Maldives' economy relies heavily on tourism, contributing 24.7% to GDP in the first quarter of 2024, followed by transportation and communication (12.3%), while fisheries and agriculture accounted for just 3.0% and 0.9%, respectively (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, Economic Indicators Report, 2024). The nation depends on imports for essential goods, with food imports alone reaching MVR 5.1 billion in January 2024. Climate change exacerbates vulnerabilities, with rising sea levels and extreme weather events threatening livelihoods. While over 75% of inhabited islands have implemented hard coastal protection measures, such as seawalls, these projects disrupt natural ecosystems, underscoring the need for sustainable, nature-based solutions (World Bank, Climate and Development Report for Maldives, 2024).

Demographically, the dependency ratio stands at 46 dependents per 100 working-age individuals, placing economic strain on families and social systems. Urban migration to Malé has left rural communities with declining populations, limited infrastructure,

and heightened vulnerability to climate impacts. Most islands house fewer than 1,000 residents, with over 40 islands home to fewer than 500 people, complicating equitable access to services (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, Population Census 2022 Report).

Culturally, the Maldives is shaped by homogeneous Islamic traditions that influence governance and societal norms. Patriarchal systems limit women's participation in decision-making and economic activities, compounded by entrenched caregiving roles and traditional expectations. Religious conservatism and legal frameworks further restrict gender equality, exacerbating disparities (UN Women, Gender Equality Snapshot: Maldives 2023).

The Maldives operates under a unitary presidential system established by the 2008 Constitution, which marked the nation's transition to a democratic multi-party system. This Constitution introduced significant reforms, including the separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The President serves as both the head of state and government, while the unicameral Parliament, the People's Majlis, enacts legislation. The judiciary, led by the Supreme Court, functions independently to ensure constitutional adherence. The 2008 reforms facilitated the country's first free elections, laying the foundation for democratic governance and greater political participation.

The dispersed geography of the Maldives presents unique governance challenges, particularly in resource allocation and service delivery. The Decentralization Act of 2010 aimed to address these issues by empowering local councils, which consist of Atoll Councils, Island Councils, and City Councils, to foster community-driven decision-making. Atoll Councils oversee administrative coordination across multiple islands within an atoll, while Island Councils are responsible for governance at the island level, managing local services, infrastructure, and community initiatives. The 2019 and 2020 amendments to the Decentralization Act strengthened local governance by formally integrating Women's Development Committees (WDCs) under the local council system, granting them an official mandate to promote gender equality and advocate for social and economic initiatives.

However, the dispersed geography of the Maldives presents unique governance challenges, particularly in resource allocation and service delivery. The Decentralization Act of 2010 aimed to address these issues by empowering local councils in the atolls to foster community-driven decision-making. Despite this effort, significant disparities persist, as resources remain concentrated in Malé, which occupies just 5.8 square kilometers yet houses over 40% of the population. This centralization has exacerbated the urban-rural divide, leaving outer islands under-resourced and more vulnerable to climate and socio-economic challenges (Government of Maldives, Decentralization Act, 2010). Additionally, while island councils have been granted increased responsibilities in governance, they often lack

the necessary knowledge, financial resources, and institutional capacity to effectively fulfill these mandates, further straining local service delivery and resilience.

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) and the risks of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment (SEAH) within this socio-economic and environmental context. By addressing systemic barriers and vulnerabilities, it aims to present actionable recommendations that promote inclusivity and resilience while safeguarding against SEAH.

2.   Methodology and Framework

The Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) and Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment (SEAH) Status Report for the Maldives was developed using a robust and concise framework specifically designed to address systemic inequalities, integrate global best practices, and ensure contextual relevance. This framework formed the backbone of the report, offering a structured methodology to analyze GESI and SEAH dynamics comprehensively within the Maldivian context. In addition to the overarching analysis, the framework was applied to provide an overview of 10 projects from the environment and marine sectors in the Maldives, highlighting how GESI and SEAH issues and principles are being addressed and mitigated in these sectors.

2.1 Conceptual Foundation

The framework is anchored in three principles:

Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA): Ensuring participation, accountability, non-discrimination, and empowerment of marginalized groups.

Intersectionality: Addressing overlapping forms of discrimination based on gender, disability, age, geography, and socio-economic status.

Sustainability and Resilience: Aligning with SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), with a specific focus on biodiversity conservation and marine pollution mitigation.

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 Literature Review:

The review analysed national policies, international commitments, donor frameworks, and existing reports on GESI and SEAH in the Maldives. Thisincluded documents related to marine biodiversity, conservation, and pollution management.

2.2.2 Stakeholder Consultations:

Conducted qualitative focus groups and interviews with government agencies, NGOs, community leaders, and vulnerable populations to gather insights on GESI and SEAH dynamics in coastal communities.

Included consultations with local councils, Women's Development Committees (WDCs), and stakeholders involved in marine and environmental sectors.

Stakeholders Consulted:

Government Representatives

1. Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSFD)
2. Lead Social Worker, MSFD
3. Project Management Unit, MSFD
4. Project Management Unit, MSFD
5. Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSFD)
6. Political Director, MSFD

International Development Partners

1. Project Management Specialist, USAID
2. Deputy Resident Representative, UNDP
3. Assistant Resident Representative, UNDP
4. Project Manager, UNDP

Local Coucils and WDC

1. Hinnavaru Island Council
2. Hinnavaru WDC
3. Baa Atoll Council
4. Shaviyani Atoll Council
5. Fuah Mulah City Council
6. Fuah Mulah City WDC
7. Noonu Kudafari Island Council
8. Noonu Kendhukulhudhoo Island Council
9. Vaavu Atoll Council
10. Alif Alif Bodufulhadhoo Island Council
11. Kulhudhuffushi City Council
12. Nolhivaram Island Council
13. Addu City Council

Organizations:

1., Aloha Ufa Watersports

2. Project Officer, Ministry of Social and Family Development

3. In Charge, Women in Fuvamulah

4. Founder, Co-leader, Salted Ventures Swimmers

5. Vice President, Miyaru Project

6. Women's Foootball Cub

2.2.3 Quantitative Analysis:

Reviewed data from national and international sources to identify trends and disparities in gender, inclusion, and safeguarding within marine conservation and pollution initiatives. The reports include:

Fitch Ratings (2024). Fitch downgrades Maldives to 'CC'

GEF Gender Equality Policy and Action Plan

Government of Maldives (2022). National Policy and Action Plan for Environment and Natural Resources: 2022-2027

Human Rights Commission of the Maldives (2021). Shadow Report, Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities

ILO (2024). Labour Force Trends in Small Island States: A Focus on the Maldives

Maldivian Ministry of Gender and Family (2024). National Gender Policy Implementation Report

Maldivian Ministry of Youth Empowerment and Development (2023). A Youth-led Approach to Climate Action in Maldives: Gender and Vulnerabilities in Coastal Communities

Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2022). Disability Census 2022

Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2022). Informal Employment Census-2022

Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2022). Mapping the Employment Landscape: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Situation in the Maldives

Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2022). Population Movement & Migration in Maldives. Key Findings from Census 2022

Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2022). Poverty and Inequality in Maldives

Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2022). Unemployment Census 2022

Maldives Policy Think Tank (2024). Maldives Gender Gap: Our Unfinished Business of the 21st Century

Ministry of Environment (2020). National Strategic Framework to Mobilize International Climate Finance to Address Climate Change in the Maldives 2020-2024

Social Media and Radicalization Study (2024). Analysis of Extremist Narratives Targeting Maldivian Youth

Transparency Maldives (2016). Maldives Migrant Worker System Assessment Report

UN Women (2023). Forecasting Time Spent in Unpaid Care and Domestic Work: A Technical Brief

UN Women (2023). Gender Equality Snapshot: Maldives 2023

UNDP (2023). Climate Adaptation and the Integration of Gender in Maldives: A Way Forward

UNDP (2024). Climate Adaptation and Livelihoods in the Maldives: Strategies for Small Island States

UNFPA Maldives (2020). Gender-Based Violence during COVID-19 Pandemic in the Maldives: An Analysis of Reported Cases

UNFPA (2018). Situation of Women in the Maldives

World Bank (2024). Report on Climate Resilience and Gender in Small Island States

World Bank (2024). Climate and Development Report for Maldives

World Bank (2023). Maldives Country Environmental Analysis: Key Highlights

2.2.4 Analytical Approach

The analysis employed a multi-dimensional lens to:

I.   Examine legal, policy, and institutional frameworks.

II. Assess institutional capacity for integrating GESI and SEAH considerations in marine and environmental projects.

III. Explore societal norms and cultural influences impacting GESI and SEAH in coastal communities.

IV. Identify vulnerabilities in key sectors, including fisheries, MPAs, and pollution management.

V. Analyze the impacts of climate change and marine degradation on marginalized groups.

2.3 Framework Application

The framework was operationalized through the assessment of key initiatives in the Maldives' marine and environmental sectors. These assessments highlighted how GESI and SEAH principles are being addressed and identified opportunities for further integration. Tools developed for this assessment include:

GESI and SEAH Assessment Questionnaire: A structured tool translating international frameworks into actionable indicators for evaluating project design, implementation, and outcomes in biodiversity and pollution management projects. The frameworks used for reference include:

World Bank's Gender Equality Strategy
UN Women's Gender Mainstreaming Approach
UK FCDO's Four Pillars of GESI
CARE's GESI Framework
OECD-DAC Guidelines
World Bank's Climate Change Action Plan
GEF Gender Action Plan
International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies Gender Strategy
International Organization for Migration (IOM) Climate Migration Framework2.
Typology of Indicators: Standardized metrics for assessing inclusivity, safeguarding mechanisms, and transformative impacts.

Rationale for the Questionnaire: Aligned with frameworks such as CEDAW, SDG 5, and ILO Conventions, tailored to the Maldives' environmental and marine conservation context.

2.4 Evaluated Initiatives

Each initiative was evaluated on its integration of gender equality, social inclusion, and safeguarding measures, focusing on areas such as project design, community engagement, SEAH prevention mechanisms, and long-term impact. The projects reviewed included:

I. Marine biodiversity conservation efforts within MPAs.

II. Initiatives targeting pollution reduction and sustainable waste management.

III. Community-based approaches to environmental resilience and inclusion.

3. Most Vulnerable Groups in the Maldives: Analysis of Core Vulnerabilities

The Maldives faces critical challenges in ensuring equitable development and social protection for several highly vulnerable populations. Women and girls contend with persistent economic marginalization and gender-based discrimination, stemming from deeply entrenched traditional gender roles and systematic barriers to economic participation. Rural and atoll communities experience systematic disadvantages across infrastructure, services, and economic opportunities, exacerbated by demographic destabilization and concentrated poverty. Persons with disabilities encounter pervasive barriers to participation and inclusion, facing higher rates of violence, limited educational access, and severe economic marginalization. The elderly population faces mounting challenges amid eroding support systems and inadequate services, with rapid demographic aging outpacing the development of necessary support infrastructure. Foreign migrant workers endure exploitation and precarious living conditions through systemic debt bondage, restricted mobility, and limited legal protections. Youth struggle with limited opportunities and social disconnection, evidenced by high unemployment rates and significant barriers to education and training, particularly in outer islands.

These vulnerabilities do not exist in isolation. Rather, they intersect and compound in complex ways that amplify disadvantage. Geographic location intensifies economic and social barriers, with rural residents facing limited access to services, employment, and development opportunities. Gender creates systematic patterns of exclusion that become more pronounced when combined with other vulnerabilities. Poverty concentrates and deepens along these intersectional lines, with 93% of the country's poor residing in the atolls. Environmental threats disproportionately affect those with limited resources for adaptation and resilience. Public debt and resulting austerity measures particularly impact those dependent on social services and protection programs. These multidimensional vulnerabilities create distinct patterns of marginalization that require comprehensive, intersectional policy responses.

This analysis presents the key vulnerable groups in the Maldives and their core vulnerabilities. The subsequent section analyses how these vulnerabilities intersect and compound to create distinct patterns of disadvantage.

3.1 Women and Girls

Economic: The labour market in the Maldives demonstrates severe gender-based marginalisation, evidenced by stark disparities in participation rates. Only 52.8% of women participate in the labour force compared to 88.7% of men, whilst the employment-to-population ratio reveals an even more concerning gap, with women at 45.4% versus 75.9% for men (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2022, Population Census Report). Over one-third of Maldivian women remain outside the labour force (Asian Development Bank, 2023, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in South Asia), with this economic inactivity particularly pronounced in outer islands, where women face labour market underutilisation of 26% compared to 18% in Malé. A significant wage gap persists, with women earning 13% less than men across all employment categories, rising to 20% for employed women (International Labour Organization, 2024, Labour Force Trends in Small Island States: A Focus on the Maldives).

Occupational segregation presents a significant barrier to women's economic advancement, showing particularly pronounced patterns in the atolls (32.9%) compared to Malé (25.1%) (Asian Development Bank, 2023, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in South Asia). Women's concentration in lower-paying service sector positions (such as cleaners, helpers, cashiers, and ticket clerks), coupled with their limited representation in managerial roles (23%), reinforces systemic economic disadvantages. This segregation is further evidenced in sector-specific employment, with women dominating education (89%) and household activities (88%), whilst remaining underrepresented in high-growth sectors such as tourism, construction, and technical services (UN Women, 2023, Gender Equality Snapshot: Maldives). This entrenched occupational segregation creates a self-perpetuating cycle where female-dominated sectors become devalued and underpaid, whilst high-growth, male-dominated sectors continue to present barriers to entry for women.

The vulnerability of women in the informal sector presents particular concerns, with women comprising only 21.4% of informal employment despite facing heightened precarity. Women in informal employment work significantly shorter hours (6 hours/day compared to men's 9.3 hours), with 50% classified as vulnerable own-account workers (International Labour Organization, 2024, Labour Force Trends in Small Island States: A Focus on the Maldives). This situation is exacerbated by limited social protection and benefits, rendering women particularly susceptible during economic downturns. The concentration of women in precarious informal work creates a troubling pattern of economic insecurity that extends beyond individual workers to affect household stability and intergenerational economic mobility.

The unpaid care economy represents one of the most significant barriers to women's economic empowerment in the Maldives. Women spend an average of 19 hours of a 24-hour day on unpaid care and domestic work, double the number of hours men (8.1

hours) spend doing the same (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2022, Time Use Survey). This comprehensive care burden encompasses childcare, elderly care, sick family care, and household management, creating particularly acute challenges in extended family settings where women may be responsible for multiple generations simultaneously. The expectation that women will manage these responsibilities creates a 'double burden' that significantly constrains their ability to engage in paid employment or pursue career advancement. The impact is particularly severe for women in low-income households who cannot afford to outsource care responsibilities, creating a self-reinforcing cycle where care duties limit earning potential, whilst limited earnings prevent access to care support services (Asian Development Bank, 2023, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in South Asia).

Career development challenges persist even for educated women, with 18.7% of degree holders working in informal employment (UN Women, 2023, Gender Equality Snapshot: Maldives). This skills mismatch, combined with barriers to labour market re-entry after career breaks, creates significant obstacles to women's economic empowerment. The concentration in sectors with limited wage negotiation power further compounds these career development challenges. This pattern suggests a systemic failure to capitalise on women's educational investments, leading to brain drain within the formal sector and reduced returns on educational investment. Educational limitations in outer islands further drive persistent outward migration, creating additional barriers to professional advancement (UN Women/UNFPA, 2018, Situation of Women in the Maldives).

Social and Cultural: Deeply entrenched traditional gender roles continue to shape women's lives and opportunities throughout the Maldives. The persistent expectation for women to prioritise their roles as primary caregivers and homemakers creates fundamental tensions with their professional aspirations and educational achievements (UN Women/UNFPA, 2018, Situation of Women in the Maldives). This social pressure manifests in various forms of opportunity costs, where women must either completely forgo career advancement or face significant stress trying to balance competing demands. The result is a systemic underutilisation of women's capabilities and a perpetuation of economic dependence, particularly pronounced in more conservative island communities. This gender disparity is evident in attitudes towards equality, with only 57.6% of men supporting gender equality compared to 80.5% of women (Asian Development Bank, 2023, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in South Asia).

Traditional and cultural conservatism in Maldivian society has led to increasingly restrictive interpretations of women's roles and rights. Religious arguments are employed to justify practices harmful to women, including child marriage and unregistered marriages. The impact is particularly visible in the tourism sector, the

country's main employer, where women's participation remains extremely low due to traditional and cultural perceptions (UN Women, 2023, Gender Equality Snapshot: Maldives). These religious and cultural barriers intersect with and reinforce existing patriarchal norms that limit women's mobility and economic opportunities. Transportation constraints in outer islands create additional barriers, further restricting women's ability to participate fully in economic and social life (UN Women, 2024, Comprehensive National-Level Review on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action).

Gender-based violence represents one of the most severe and pervasive social vulnerabilities facing women in the Maldives. One in three women aged 15-49 have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, while one in four partnered women report intimate partner violence (UNFPA, 2020, Gender-Based Violence in the Maldives: Trends and Impacts). The universal nature of violence against women in Maldivian society is particularly troubling, with national prevalence data suggesting that all Maldivian women experience some form of violence at least once in their lives (Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services, 2020, Status Report on Violence Against Women and Children). Multiple systemic barriers prevent women from seeking help or reporting violence, creating a culture of silence and impunity. Cultural stigma and family pressure serve as primary deterrents, whilst limited awareness of available services and legal rights further compounds the problem. Women's financial dependence on perpetrators creates a particularly challenging cycle of vulnerability, where economic constraints reinforce exposure to violence. The geographic isolation of outer island communities adds another layer of complexity, with limited access to support services creating additional barriers for women seeking assistance (UN Women, 2023, Gender Equality Snapshot: Maldives).

The marriage and family framework in the Maldives creates particular vulnerabilities for women through systematic gender bias. Men's unilateral right to divorce both in and out of court, without providing reasons, creates significant power imbalances in marital relationships. The emergence of unregistered marriages has created additional risks for women and children (UN Women/UNFPA, 2018, Situation of Women in the Maldives). These practices, combined with the widespread acceptance of polygamy, significantly impact family stability and women's wellbeing. Complex custody and maintenance challenges particularly affect divorced women and single mothers, who face loss of custody by marrying non-mahram men or relocating without the father's permission. The absence of effective tracking systems for maintenance order compliance leaves many women without reliable financial support even when awarded by courts (Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services, 2023, Population and Housing Census Report). Rural to urban migration patterns have further disrupted traditional community support systems, increasing the burden on women in both urban and rural settings (UN Women, 2024, Comprehensive National-Level Review on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action).

Political Representation and Access to Justice: The Maldives' political framework reveals a stark contrast between progressive constitutional provisions and persistent gender inequalities. While the 2008 Constitution removed legal barriers for women to contest the presidency, no woman has ever run for the nation's highest office (Shadow Report to the UN Committee on CEDAW, 2019, The Maldives' Progress and Challenges in Implementing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women). Women's representation in parliament remains critically low, holding only 3.2% of parliamentary seats in the Majlis as of the latest election in April 2024 (3 out of 93 MPs), marking a decline from 4.6% in 2019 (4 out of 85 MPs). This places the Maldives among the lowest-ranking countries in South Asia for women's political participation. Adding to these challenges is the increasing monetisation of politics, which exacerbates barriers for women. With an average monthly income disparity where women earn 13% less than men across all employment categories, and employed women earning 20% less than men, many women lack the financial independence required to fund political campaigns (International Labour Organization, 2024, Labour Force Trends in Small Island States: A Focus on the Maldives).

Local government representation presents a complex picture of progress and persistent challenges. Amendments to the Decentralisation Act in 2019 introduced a 33% quota for women in local councils, resulting in significant gains. By 2024, women held 39.7% of council seats, a substantial increase from just 6% in the previous term. This quota also led to the historic election of the first female atoll council president in 2023 (United Nations Development Programme and Local Government Authority, 2024, Assessment of Women's Representation and Influence in Local Governance). Despite these advances, patriarchal norms continue to undermine women's meaningful participation in local governance. Women councillors are often marginalised in key decision-making processes, particularly in development planning and natural resource management, where male-dominated networks prevail. A 2024 assessment by the Local Government Authority and UNDP found that while female councillors perceive a positive shift in their roles, many still struggle to influence critical governance issues (UNDP and Local Government Authority, 2024, Challenges and Opportunities for Women Councillors in Decision-Making Roles in the Maldives).

The justice landscape for Maldivian women reveals a striking contrast between progressive legal frameworks and practical implementation. While the 2008 Constitution provides fundamental protections including explicit guarantees against gender-based discrimination, and the Maldives has ratified CEDAW, significant gaps persist in legal protection (Shadow Report to the UN Committee on CEDAW, 2019, The Maldives' Progress and Challenges in Implementing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women). The current legal aid framework exemplifies the systemic gaps in justice access, with 80% of women remaining unaware of available legal aid services (Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services, 2020, Status Report on Violence Against Women and Children).

Those in island communities face additional barriers due to limited availability of lawyers and standardised support mechanisms (UN Women, 2023, Gender Equality Snapshot: Maldives). The Sexual Offences framework reveals troubling statistics, with 26.98% of women reporting procedural difficulties, 19.2% facing legal costs barriers, and 15.4% expressing fear of reprisals (Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services, 2023, Population and Housing Census Report). The Family Law framework, while providing essential protections including property division rights and maintenance rights, faces substantial implementation challenges that disproportionately affect women. Lengthy divorce procedures, especially involving children, combined with limited support during legal proceedings, create significant barriers (UN Women/UNFPA, 2018, Situation of Women in the Maldives). The intersection of cultural norms with justice-seeking creates profound challenges, as women pursuing legal remedies, especially in domestic violence cases, face significant stigmatisation from their communities. The pressure to maintain family privacy and reputation often outweighs personal safety considerations, creating a culture of silence around abuse. Courts frequently prioritise family unity over women's safety concerns, creating especially challenging circumstances for women with children, who must navigate both their own safety needs and societal pressure to maintain family structures (UN Women/UNFPA, 2018, Situation of Women in the Maldives).

3.2 Rural/Atoll Communities

Demographic: The outer islands and atolls of the Maldives are experiencing critical demographic destabilisation, with over 50% of registered island populations actually residing in Malé. This exodus is particularly severe in certain islands, where up to 67% of registered residents have relocated to the capital. The selective nature of this outmigration, predominantly among working-age populations, creates a demographic vacuum in island communities. This trend is projected to intensify, with predictions showing that by 2054, more than 64% of the Resident Maldivian Population will be concentrated in the Greater Malé Area, fundamentally threatening the sustainability of outer island communities *(*World Bank*, Navigating Demographics: Economic Challenges of Aging and Youth in the Maldives*, 2023).

The atolls are experiencing severe demographic distortions due to disproportionate outmigration patterns. The data reveals that 13 islands have lost over 50% of their registered population to Malé, while an additional 16 islands have 40-49% of their population in the capital (Maldives Bureau of Statistics: Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives*, 2022). The exodus of working-age populations leaves behind increasingly ageing communities, creating unsustainable dependency ratios. This selective depopulation creates a self-reinforcing cycle where the remaining population becomes

increasingly vulnerable due to reduced support systems and limited economic opportunities.

The demographic collapse is particularly severe in larger atolls like GA and GDh, where two in five residents now live in Malé, threatening the very existence of historically significant island communities (World Bank, Navigating Demographics: Economic Challenges of Aging and Youth in the Maldives, 2023). This situation has reached a crisis point where communities struggle to maintain essential functions, with many islands approaching or having already fallen below viable population thresholds necessary to maintain basic services and infrastructure.

Economic: The outer islands and atolls have become focal points of poverty concentration in the Maldives. The poverty rate as measured by the international poverty line (US$5.5 PPP per person per day) is 1.7 percent, and the entire population of the poor is concentrated in atolls. At the national poverty line (71.4 Maldivian rufiyaa [MVR] per person per day), the poverty rate is 5.4 percent. About 10 percent of individuals in atolls are poor, compared to less than 1 percent of individuals in Malé. Strikingly, 93 percent of the country's poor live in atolls (Maldives Bureau of Statistics: Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives, 2022). This economic vulnerability is particularly pronounced in households dependent on traditional sectors like fisheries, which consistently show higher poverty rates than those engaged in industrial or service sectors.

The labour landscape in the outer atolls reveals stark disparities compared to Malé, with significantly higher rates of labour underutilisation at 26% compared to 18% in the capital. The situation is particularly alarming for young women in the atolls, where NEET rates reach 28.3% for ages 15-24 and climb dramatically to 42.7% for those aged 18-35 (International Labour Organization: Labour Force Trends in Small Island States: A Focus on the Maldives, 2024). Women in atolls work fewer paid hours, averaging only 5.3 hours per day compared to 7 hours in Malé. The situation is particularly severe in certain atolls, where informal employment dominates - Shaviyani shows 46.8% and HDh 44.8% of women working in the informal sector with lower wages and job security (Maldives Bureau of Statistics: Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives, 2022).

The mass exodus of working-age populations has critically undermined the economic foundations of island communities, with 76% now concentrated in Greater Malé (World Bank, Navigating Demographics: Economic Challenges of Aging and Youth in the Maldives, 2023). This workforce drain creates a devastating cycle where reduced productive capacity leads to further economic decline. The combined rates of unemployment and potential labour force participation in atolls like Laamu (32.7%) and Raa (30.7%) are significantly higher than both the national average and Malé rates, highlighting the severe economic challenges faced by those who remain in rural areas (Maldives Bureau of Statistics: Unemployment Census Report, 2022).

Infrastructure and Services: The outer islands demonstrate severe infrastructure inadequacies that fundamentally limit development potential. Healthcare systems face mounting challenges in maintaining even basic services, with only 15 of 66 sewer systems on local islands having treatment plants, and merely 6 remaining operational (World Bank: Maldives Country Environmental Analysis: Towards a More Sustainable and Resilient Blue Economy, 2024). The difficulty in retaining healthcare staff, combined with expensive emergency medical transport needs, creates dangerous gaps in essential medical coverage.

Education systems are simultaneously approaching a breaking point, characterised by financial inviability and quality deterioration due to dwindling student populations and inability to retain qualified teachers. The data reveals that 76% of atoll households rely on untreated rainwater, necessitating regular emergency water supplies during dry seasons (United Nations Development Programme: Developing Disaster Risk Profile for Maldives, 2020). Transport services and connectivity for people as well as for basic goods remains a major concern, with systematic failures in accommodating basic needs.

The interconnected nature of these service failures creates a devastating cycle where decreased service reliability encourages further outmigration, while making it increasingly expensive and difficult to maintain basic services for the remaining population. This comprehensive service deterioration particularly affects vulnerable populations, creating life-threatening risks and severely limiting development opportunities in island communities.

Social and Community: The accelerating outmigration leads to the erosion of traditional community support networks and social capital in the outer atolls. Data shows that 92% of individuals citing family responsibilities as their reason for not working are women, creating a particular strain on community care systems (International Labour Organization: Labour Force Trends in Small Island States: A Focus on the Maldives, 2024). Community networks have been severely impacted, reducing mutual support systems and increasing isolation. This dissolution of social fabric weakens traditional safety nets and increases the burden on remaining formal support services.

The exodus of educated and professionally qualified individuals creates a significant leadership vacuum in island communities. The data showing that 50.6% of informal workers in Malé are registered in atolls demonstrates this drain of human capital (Maldives Bureau of Statistics: Poverty and Inequality in the Maldives, 2022). Those remaining face increased domestic and care responsibilities that limit their ability to take on community leadership roles, while the general decline in community vitality reduces traditional platforms for participation in decision-making. This systematic reduction in leadership capacity threatens the long-term balanced development of island communities.

3.3 Persons with Disabilities

Prevalence and Demographics: The Maldives defines disability as "having long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society, on an equal basis with others" (Maldives Census Report 2022, Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The national disability prevalence rate stands at 6.9%, representing 24,401 people. The rate shows significant gender disparity, with higher prevalence among females (7.8%) compared to males (6.1%). Prevalence varies markedly across age groups, with rates of 3.8% among children aged 5-17, 3.1% in young adults, 8% in adults aged 36-64, and rising sharply to 36% among the elderly (65+). The elderly, who represent only 5% of the population, constitute 30% of all people with disabilities, while adults aged 36-64 comprise 41% of those with disabilities. Geographic distribution reveals notable disparities, with Malé showing a prevalence rate of 5.7%, while the atolls demonstrate a higher rate at 7.8%. GA Atoll and Meem Atoll record the highest prevalence at 9.6% each (Disability Survey Report *2022*, Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

Social and Cultural: Persons with disabilities in the Maldives face deeply entrenched social barriers despite progressive legislation (*Na*tional Disability Act 2010 Implementation Review, UNDP, 2023). The data reveal an alarming pattern—disabled individuals are more than four times likely to experience violence compared to non-disabled persons. This vulnerability is particularly acute for those with mental health conditions, where almost half report experiencing violence. These statistics point to a deeply troubling pattern of exploitation and abuse, exacerbated by limited support systems and societal stigma (Gender-Based Violence and Disability in the Maldives, UNFPA, 2020).

The systemic nature of social exclusion is evident in the widespread lack of awareness about disability laws and policies among citizens and civil society organisations. This knowledge gap creates a self-perpetuating cycle where rights violations go unrecognised and unchallenged. The problem is particularly acute in the high NEET rates among disabled youth, with 48% of those aged 18-35 years being neither employed nor in education—double the rate of non-disabled youth (Maldives Labour Force Survey 2022, Maldives Bureau of Statistics).

Education: The education system demonstrates systematic failures in providing equitable access to persons with disabilities. The stark statistic that 19% of disabled individuals have never attended school reveals a fundamental breakdown educational inclusion (Inclusive Education Gaps Report, UNICEF Maldives, 2023). This exclusion is particularly telling when compared to completion rates—while 98% of non-disabled adolescents complete primary education, only 79% of their disabled peers achieve this basic educational milestone. The presence of only one dedicated school for children

with disabilities across the entire nation further underscores the severe limitations in specialised educational infrastructure (Education Sector Review: Maldives 2022, Ministry of Education, Maldives).

Despite an apparent framework for inclusion, with 87% of government schools having Special Education Needs units, these facilities face critical operational challenges. The systemic inadequacies manifest in multiple forms, from insufficient resources to lack of qualified staff and absence of clear operational guidelines. Individual Education Plans, though mandated, rarely translate into meaningful support, creating a façade of inclusion without substantive educational benefit (Education Policy Review, UNDP, 2023). This gap between policy and implementation is particularly evident in the stark literacy disparities, where disabled individuals show significantly lower rates in both Dhivehi (89% versus 99%) and English (41% versus 86%) compared to their non-disabled peers (Inclusive Education Study 2023, UNICEF).

Children with specific types of disabilities face particularly high rates of educational exclusion. Those with communication difficulties show the highest rate at 34.5% out of school, closely followed by those with self-care difficulties at 32.8%. These statistics suggest that the current educational framework fails to accommodate diverse disability needs. The dramatically low rate of degree-level education achievement (3% compared to 11% for non-disabled) further demonstrates how these early barriers compound into lifelong educational disadvantages (Education Report: Inclusive Challenges in the Maldives, Ministry of Education, 2023).

Economic: The economic marginalisation of persons with disabilities is starkly evident in labour force participation patterns. The overall participation rate marks significant disparities, with only 34% of disabled persons participating in the labour force compared to 67% of non-disabled persons (Maldives Labour Force Trends 2023, International Labour Organization). The gender dimension compounds this exclusion—disabled women's labour force participation stands at a mere 28%, highlighting the intersectional nature of economic vulnerability. These statistics suggest deeply entrenched structural barriers that effectively exclude a significant portion of the disabled population from meaningful economic participation (Gender and Labour Report 2023, ILO).

The quality of employment available to persons with disabilities reveals concerning patterns of economic vulnerability. The high concentration in informal employment (42%) suggests limited access to stable, protected work environments. This vulnerability is further evidenced by shorter average working hours (7.6 hours compared to 8.2 for non-disabled persons) and concentration in lower-skilled occupations (Maldives Employment Trends Study 2024, Ministry of Economic Development). Recent regulation (R-9/2024) has highlighted structural weaknesses in employment support systems, particularly in the private sector, where incentives for

inclusion remain inadequate and enforcement mechanisms weak (Maldives Employment Regulations Overview 2024, Ministry of Economic Development).

Housing and Living Conditions: The impact of disability on household composition and stability manifests in multiple dimensions. With 22% of households including at least one disabled member and significantly larger household sizes (6.3 members versus 4.9 for non-disabled households), these statistics suggest increased dependency ratios and economic pressure (Maldives Census Report 2022, Maldives Bureau of Statistics). The high proportion of female-headed households (55%) among disabled households, combined with their lower employment rates (53% versus 70% for non-disabled households) and higher average age (8 years older than non-disabled household heads), indicates particular vulnerabilities in household economic stability (Household Survey Data Analysis 2023, Maldives Bureau of Statistics).

Access to Justice and Rights: The justice system presents significant structural barriers for disabled individuals. The lack of accessible reporting mechanisms, combined with insufficient communication support services, particularly sign language interpretation, effectively denies many disabled persons access to legal remedies. These barriers are particularly problematic given the high rates of violence against disabled persons, creating a cycle where vulnerability to abuse is compounded by limited access to justice (Access to Justice for Persons with Disabilities: Maldives Report 2024, UNDP).

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed particular vulnerabilities in crisis response systems for disabled populations. Disabled individuals faced significant challenges in accessing social security and additional funding during the crisis, whilst difficulties in obtaining government-issued identity cards created additional barriers to accessing emergency support (Post-Pandemic Vulnerability Report: Maldives 2023, UNDP). The limited awareness of disability rights and policies among both citizens and civil society organisations reveals a critical gap in rights protection. This knowledge deficit, combined with weak enforcement mechanisms, creates an environment where rights violations may go unrecognised and unchallenged (Disability Rights Advocacy Review, UNDP, 2024).

3.4 Elderly Population

Demographic Patterns: The Maldives is experiencing a dramatic demographic transformation in its elderly population. The proportion of elderly citizens (aged 65+) is projected to increase from 3.5% in 2014 to 9% by 2030, reaching 12% by 2040 and 14% by 2050 (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, Population and Housing Census 2023). In absolute terms, this represents a surge to 49,124 elderly citizens by 2040 and

75,404 by 2050 (United Nations Development Programme & Local Government Authority, *Assessment of Women's Representation and Influence in Local Governance: Post-2019 Quota Amendments*, 2024). This shift is particularly striking given the historical context, where the median age has nearly doubled from 16 years in 1990 to 30 years in 2022 (World Bank, *Navigating Demographics: Economic Challenges of Aging and Youth in the Maldives*, 2023). Notably, within the current elderly population of 20,553, women constitute nearly half at 10,023, indicating significant gender-specific demographic considerations (Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services, *Population and Housing Census Report*, 2023).

The transformation of age structures is generating concerning support ratios. The old-age dependency ratio is projected to increase from 5 elderly per 100 working-age people in 2014 to 9 by 2030, eventually reaching 20 by 2054 (World Bank, *Navigating Demographics: Economic Challenges of Aging and Youth in the Maldives*, 2023). Simultaneously, the potential support ratio shows a dramatic decline from 14 working-age persons per elderly in 2014 to 7 by 2040, falling further to 4 by 2054 (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, *Population and Housing Census 2023*). Whilst the Maldives currently maintains the lowest elderly population percentage in the region, it confronts one of the steepest projected increases in the old-age dependency ratio, creating unique challenges for social and economic planning (United Nations Population Fund, *Gender-Based Violence in the Maldives: Trends and Impacts*, 2020).

Economic Considerations: Economic vulnerability amongst the elderly is evidenced by extremely low labour force participation rates of 15% overall, with a marked gender disparity between men (21%) and women (8%) (Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services, *Population and Housing Census Report*, 2023). This limited participation reflects both structural barriers and health-related constraints, with 35% citing health as an employment barrier (World Bank, *Navigating Demographics: Economic Challenges of Aging and Youth in the Maldives*, 2023). Twenty per cent of the elderly population lives below the poverty line as of 2023, highlighting significant economic precarity (Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services, *Population and Housing Census Report*, 2023). This vulnerability is compounded by limited retirement benefits, particularly pronounced among informal sector workers who constitute 89.9% of elderly employment (Maldives Pension Administration Office, *Maldives Pension Statistical Report*, 2022).

The pension system reveals striking gender disparities, with men constituting 79.7% of pension beneficiaries compared to women at 20.2% in 2020 (Maldives Pension Administration Office, *Maldives Pension Statistical Report*, 2022). This stark disparity in pension access reflects broader patterns of economic disadvantage throughout women's life courses, creating particularly acute financial vulnerabilities in their elder years (Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services, *Population and Housing Census Report*, 2023). The limited coverage of informal sector workers in the pension system compounds these economic challenges, leaving many elderly without

adequate financial protection (World Bank, Navigating Demographics: Economic Challenges of Aging and Youth in the Maldives, 2023).

Healthcare Challenges: A significant proportion (36%) of the elderly population experiences disabilities as of 2022, with higher prevalence rates amongst women (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, Population and Housing Census 2023). This health vulnerability directly impacts economic participation, with 35% of elderly individuals citing health conditions as a primary barrier to employment (Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services, Population and Housing Census Report, 2023). The situation is expected to worsen, with chronic diseases projected to increase by 30% by 2030 (World Bank, Maldives Country Environmental Analysis: Towards a More Sustainable and Resilient Blue Economy, 2024).

The Maldives faces severe gaps in elderly healthcare infrastructure, marked by the complete absence of geriatric specialised facilities, state-owned elderly care facilities, and private elderly care institutions (Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services, Population and Housing Census Report, 2023). Care for age-related illnesses remains limited to multipurpose hospitals, whilst rehabilitation services and assistive devices are insufficiently available (Maldives Health Accounts, Maldives Health Expenditure Review 2020). These deficits are particularly concerning given that elderly aged 50 and above account for the majority of healthcare expenditure, which has shown consistent annual increases of 9.9% between 2016 and 2019 (Maldives Health Accounts, Maldives Health Expenditure Review 2020).

Housing and Infrastructure: Housing infrastructure throughout the Maldives demonstrates a widespread lack of elder-friendly features and poor disability accommodations (Ministry of National Planning, Housing, and Infrastructure, Maldives National Housing Strategy, 2023). Urban areas, particularly Malé, face severe overcrowding issues, whilst rural housing infrastructure remains inadequate for elderly needs (United Nations Development Programme & Local Government Authority, Assessment of Women's Representation and Influence in Local Governance: Post-2019 Quota Amendments, 2024). The limited availability of accessible public spaces further restricts elderly mobility and community engagement (Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services, Population and Housing Census Report, 2023). Transportation access remains problematic for elderly residents, particularly affecting their ability to access essential services (Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation, National Transport Strategy, 2023). A significant proportion of homes lack disaster-resistant features, creating additional vulnerabilities for elderly occupants who may face mobility challenges during emergencies (World Bank, Maldives Country Environmental Analysis: Towards a More Sustainable and Resilient Blue Economy, 2024).

Social Isolation and Support System: Recent data from 2023 indicates that 52% of elderly individuals live alone, with 40% reporting experiences of loneliness (Ministry of

Gender, Family, and Social Services, Population and Housing Census Report, 2023). The traditional family support structure shows signs of significant erosion, with projections indicating a decline from 70% currently to only 50% of elderly living with family by 2040 (World Bank, Navigating Demographics: Economic Challenges of Aging and Youth in the Maldives, 2023). The disruption of traditional family support systems, combined with limited community engagement opportunities and reduced intergenerational interaction, creates significant social vulnerabilities for elderly populations (Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services, Population and Housing Census Report, 2023).

Digital Engagement: Limited digital literacy amongst elderly residents creates substantial barriers to accessing online services, particularly affecting public service delivery (Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services, Population and Housing Census Report, 2023). Rural technology access remains poor, creating geographic disparities in digital inclusion (United Nations Development Programme & Local Government Authority, Assessment of Women's Representation and Influence in Local Governance: Post-2019 Quota Amendments, 2024). Elderly women face compounded digital exclusion due to lower education levels, limiting their participation in the digital economy (World Bank, Navigating Demographics: Economic Challenges of Aging and Youth in the Maldives, 2023). These barriers particularly affect their ability to access digital public services and financial platforms (United Nations Development Programme & Local Government Authority, Assessment of Women's Representation and Influence in Local Governance: Post-2019 Quota Amendments, 2024).

Policy and Legal Framework: The absence of comprehensive elder protection laws, combined with insufficient penalties for exploitation and discrimination, creates fundamental vulnerabilities. The lack of clear legal definitions for elder abuse and neglect, alongside missing mandatory reporting requirements, undermines protection mechanisms. Pension systems face growing demographic pressures and demonstrate poor coverage of informal sector workers. The inadequate indexation of pensions to inflation, combined with weak integration of various social protection schemes, creates financial vulnerabilities.

Healthcare policies demonstrate limited integration of geriatric care in health systems and insufficient focus on preventive healthcare. The poor provisions for long-term care, inadequate mental health support frameworks, and weak coordination between healthcare services create systemic vulnerabilities. Poor coordination between national and local authorities hampers effective policy implementation. Insufficient resources, limited enforcement capacity, and weak monitoring systems undermine policy effectiveness. The inadequate oversight of elder care facilities and poor integration of elder concerns in development planning create additional vulnerabilities.

3.5 Foreign Migrant Workers

Demographics: The Maldives is experiencing a dramatic demographic transformation driven by foreign migration. Foreigners now constitute one in every four residents, with 40% of all foreign residents concentrated in Malé, contributing to the city's 4% annual population growth over the past seven years (World Bank, 2023: Maldives Country Environmental Analysis – Towards a More Sustainable and Resilient Blue Economy). The workforce demographics show striking imbalances, with foreign workers substantially outnumbering Maldivian workers in prime working ages, most notably in the 25-29 age group where foreigners exceed Maldivians by 10,000 (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2022: Population Census Report).

This demographic shift is projected to intensify dramatically, with the foreign population expected to expand more than four-fold from 97,774 in 2014 to 416,822 by 2054, leading to foreigners constituting 43% of the total population (World Bank, 2023: Navigating Demographics – Economic Challenges of Aging and Youth in the Maldives). The foreign worker population exhibits an extreme gender disparity, with a ratio of 1,017 male foreign workers for every 100 female foreign workers, a severe imbalance expected to persist in future demographic projections (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2022: Population Census Report).

Economic and Financial: Foreign workers in the Maldives face severe financial exploitation through systemic debt bondage, with recruitment fees often exceeding several months' wages (Transparency Maldives, 2016: Maldives Migrant Worker System Assessment Report). The cycle of debt is exacerbated by widespread wage violations, including systematic non-payment or delayed wages, and discriminatory pay scales based on nationality (International Labour Organization, 2024: Labour Force Trends in Small Island States). This financial vulnerability creates a self-perpetuating cycle of exploitation, where workers remain trapped in abusive conditions due to outstanding debts and inability to support their families (Transparency Maldives, 2016). This financial burden is particularly acute among Bangladeshi workers, who frequently secure high-interest loans to pay recruitment costs (International Labour Organization, 2024).

The absence of social security benefits or financial safety nets further compounds their precarious economic situation (International Labour Organization, 2024). Workers are frequently unable to change employers despite exploitative conditions, forced to comply with illegal demands to maintain their employment status. The inability to negotiate working hours or conditions further erodes their personal autonomy, creating a perpetual state of powerlessness (Transparency Maldives, 2016).

Rights and Legal Status: Workers experience fundamental restrictions on personal autonomy through widespread passport retention and restricted mobility (Transparency Maldives, 2016: Maldives Migrant Worker System Assessment Report). This control mechanism is particularly severe in resort islands and for domestic workers, where geographical isolation compounds their vulnerability. The

systematic denial of document control creates a precarious existence where workers face constant risks of becoming undocumented through employer non-compliance with visa regulations (Transparency Maldives, 2016).

The systematic denial of access to effective grievance mechanisms creates a state of perpetual vulnerability where workers are unable to seek redress for rights violations. This powerlessness is particularly acute when facing deportation threats before labour disputes can be resolved (International Labour Organization, 2024). The combination of language barriers, limited legal representation, and weak enforcement mechanisms creates a structural inability to assert basic rights. Fear of retaliation for reporting problems further silences workers, leaving them exposed to continuous exploitation without effective recourse (Transparency Maldives, 2016).

Living and Working Conditions: The accommodation crisis facing migrant workers, particularly in Malé, has reached critical levels with severe overcrowding and substandard living conditions (World Bank, 2024: Climate and Development Report for Maldives). Housing facilities frequently lack basic amenities, with workers often confined to spaces far below habitable standards. This housing vulnerability is particularly acute in construction sector accommodation, where workers face both substandard living conditions and heightened occupational hazards, creating a compound effect on their physical and mental wellbeing (International Labour Organization, 2024).

Workers face severe occupational hazards, particularly in the construction sector, where inadequate safety measures and limited protective equipment create life-threatening conditions. This vulnerability is compounded by restricted access to healthcare services, with basic insurance coverage proving insufficient for serious medical needs. The combination of hazardous working conditions (Transparency Maldives, 2016), excessive working hours, and limited medical access creates a perfect storm of health vulnerabilities that disproportionately affects low-skilled workers. The physical strain from prolonged working hours and poor living conditions further deteriorates their health status (World Bank, 2023: Maldives Country Environmental Analysis).

Psychosocial Impact: Workers endure severe psychological distress stemming from multiple layers of isolation (International Labour Organization, 2024: Labour Force Trends in Small Island States). The geographical dispersion across resort islands and worksites creates physical isolation, while language barriers and cultural disconnection lead to profound social marginalisation. This is particularly severe for domestic workers, who face extreme restrictions on social interaction and communication with the outside world (Transparency Maldives, 2016).

The inability to maintain meaningful family connections, combined with cultural displacement and communication barriers, creates significant psychological burden.

Limited access to support networks or mental health services leaves these psychological vulnerabilities unaddressed, leading to deteriorating mental wellbeing and increased vulnerability to exploitation (International Labour Organization, 2024).

3.6 Youth

Demographics: The Maldivian youth demographic, comprising individuals aged 18-34 years, represents a significant 37% of the national population. This youth cohort is characterised by distinct geographical concentrations, with one-third residing in the capital city of Malé. A notable demographic shift is evident in the population composition, where the number of foreign youth now exceeds that of local young people. This demographic pattern hints at underlying structural challenges in youth employment and opportunity distribution across the archipelago (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, Population Census 2022 Report).

Economic and Educational: The Maldivian youth face substantial challenges in accessing quality education and stable employment opportunities, despite the country's status as the wealthiest nation in South Asia. Youth unemployment stands at an alarming 26% (World Bank, Maldives Country Environmental Analysis: Key Highlights, 2023). The labour market presents a paradoxical scenario where approximately 100,000 foreign workers are legally employed, with an additional estimated 30,000 working illegally, while local youth struggle to secure meaningful employment. This situation underscores significant misalignments in the labour market and raises questions about the effectiveness of youth economic integration strategies (International Labour Organization, Labour Force Trends in Small Island States: A Focus on the Maldives, 2024).

The current labour market structure reveals concerning trends in youth employment patterns. Half of all employed Maldivians aged 15-19 are engaged in informal employment, indicating premature exit from education into unstable work arrangements. More troublingly, 19.5% of young Maldivians aged 15-24 are neither in employment, education, nor training (NEET), with this figure rising to 23% for those aged 18-35 (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, Unemployment Census 2022).

Gender disparities are particularly pronounced, especially in the atolls, where the NEET rate for young women reaches an alarming 42.7% compared to 11-12% for men (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, Poverty and Inequality in Maldives, 2022). This disparity is deeply rooted in social and cultural norms that disproportionately burden young women with unpaid household and care responsibilities. The concentration of opportunities in Malé has created significant regional imbalances, evidenced by the fact that 50.6% of informal workers in Malé are registered in atolls (World Bank,

Navigating Demographics: Economic Challenges of Aging and Youth in the Maldives, 2023).

Disability and Accessibility: Despite legislative frameworks intended to protect and support disabled youth, significant barriers persist in their integration into mainstream society. The 2010 Disability Act has largely failed in its implementation, with the Disability Council remaining non-functional for five years. This policy vacuum has resulted in continued systemic discrimination and limited progress in disability rights (UN Women, Gender Equality Snapshot: Maldives 2023).

Youth with disabilities face significant barriers in accessing formal education and training. In the 15-19 age group, when participation rates peak, they lag behind their peers without disabilities. This disparity widens further between ages 20-30, highlighting the persistent challenges in educational access for young people with disabilities. Limited provisions for overseas study in specialist schools and inadequate support for university access, particularly for those requiring assistance or sign language interpretation, further compound educational marginalisation (UNICEF, Child Protection and SEAH Risks in the Maldives: A Situational Analysis, 2020).

Drug Use and Rehabilitation: The critical shortage of rehabilitation facilities is evident in the one-year waiting list for court-mandated rehabilitation. With only one treatment centre and two detoxification centres available, predominantly concentrated in Malé and two other cities, geographic accessibility presents a significant barrier (United Nations Development Programme, Maldives GESI and SEAH Risk Analysis Report, 2024). The current approach employs a standardised treatment programme regardless of drug type, failing to address individual needs. The lack of a national strategy or policy for prevention, combined with limited post-rehabilitation support, creates a cycle of vulnerability and relapse.

The stigmatisation of drug users is severe, with 44% in Malé and 53% in other atolls reporting conflicts with family and friends. This social alienation, combined with the need to relocate to Malé for treatment despite high costs, creates significant barriers to recovery and reintegration (Transparency Maldives, Prison Radicalization Study, 2022).

Health and Social Isolation: Statistical evidence reveals concerning rates of mental health challenges, with 35% of adolescents experiencing depression and 14% seriously considering suicide (Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services, Status Report on Violence Against Women and Children, 2020). The severity of social isolation is particularly striking, with 69% of surveyed youth identifying it as a serious problem. The last national mental health survey was conducted in 2003, indicating a significant gap in contemporary understanding. Multiple barriers impede access to mental health services, including inability to recognise symptoms, negative social perceptions, misinformation, and limited service availability.

Reports reveal that young people are experiencing a profound disconnect from their communities. A striking 80 percent of respondents identified social isolation as a significant problem affecting youth. Two-thirds reported feeling shut out of decision-making processes (CARE International, GESI Framework Overview, n.d.). This combination of exclusion and inadequate support creates a particularly vulnerable environment for youth mental health.

Young people in the Maldives face significant barriers in accessing sexual and reproductive health information and services. Youth understanding is largely restricted to information received through biology lessons and school-based life skills programmes. A significant communication gap exists between parents and youth regarding sexual and reproductive health. Young people often resort to seeking information from friends, family members, or electronic and print media, which may not always be accurate or reliable. The illegality of premarital sexual activity has led to limited data collection and restricted service access for unmarried youth (United Nations Population Fund, Gender-Based Violence in the Maldives: Trends and Impacts, 2020).

Extremism and Juvenile Justice: The Maldives faces unique challenges regarding youth radicalisation, with the country recording the highest per capita recruitment to ISIS globally. Prisons have been identified as key locations for radicalisation, with a concerning overlap developing between criminal groups and extremist networks (Transparency Maldives, Prison Radicalization Study, 2022). The prison population comprises a rotating cast of repeat offenders, creating an environment conducive to radicalisation. Significant gaps in religious education create vulnerabilities that extremist recruiters exploit, particularly evident in targeted recruitment of vulnerable groups, especially those in drug rehabilitation programmes or prison settings.

Recent Maldives Police Service reports indicate a troubling upward trajectory in juvenile offending rates. This trend suggests underlying systemic failures in youth support and intervention systems, particularly in urban areas where youth populations are concentrated. The Maldives is considering lowering the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility (Maldives Police Service, Youth Offending Trends and Implications for Juvenile Justice, 2024), presenting a concerning development that would expand the criminalisation of young people. Prison overcrowding leads to the mixing of all prisoner types, while limited education and drug treatment programmes fail to prepare inmates for reintegration. Limited support for reintegration into society often leads ex-prisoners to turn to gangs for protection.

3.7 Key Intersectional Issues

Urban-Rural Divide Intersectionalities The outer islands demonstrate systematic weakening across multiple dimensions, creating compound vulnerabilities for residents. Women in atolls face significantly higher rates of labor underutilization at 26% compared to 18% in the capital, with NEET rates for young women reaching an alarming 42.7% compared to 11-12% for men. Women in atolls work fewer paid hours, averaging only 5.3 hours per day compared to 7 hours in Malé, largely due to limited formal employment opportunities and family responsibilities (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, Poverty and Inequality in Maldives, 2022).

Systematic poverty concentration in the atolls is severe, with 93% of the country's poor residing in these areas. The poverty rate in atolls reaches 10% compared to less than 1% in Malé, while certain atolls face particularly high rates of informal employment – Shaviyani shows 46.8% and HDh 44.8% of women working in the informal sector with lower wages and job security (World Bank, Navigating Demographics: Economic Challenges of Aging and Youth in the Maldives, 2023).

Service access disparities create additional layers of vulnerability. Healthcare systems face mounting challenges in maintaining even basic services, while education systems approach breaking point due to dwindling student populations and inability to retain qualified teachers. The geographic isolation of outer island communities adds another layer of complexity, with limited access to support services creating additional barriers for women seeking assistance (Asian Development Bank, Multi-Hazard Risk Atlas of Maldives, 2020).

Gender Inequality Intersectionalities Young women face compound vulnerabilities that intensify with age. By age 35, women are six times more likely than men to be in NEET status, while the overall NEET rate among young women (22%) significantly exceeds that of young men (17%). Career development challenges persist even for educated women, with 18.7% of degree holders working in informal employment (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, Unemployment Census 2022).

Disabled women experience multiple layers of disadvantage, with labor force participation at just 28% compared to 34% for disabled men. The unemployment rate for disabled women reaches 10% compared to 4% for disabled men, while their concentration in informal employment (50%) creates additional economic vulnerabilities. These economic challenges combine with higher rates of violence and exploitation, limited access to reproductive healthcare, and greater social isolation to create comprehensive patterns of disadvantage (UN Women, Comprehensive National-Level Review on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 2024).

Women in the informal sector face particular precarity, working significantly shorter hours (6 hours/day compared to men's 9.3 hours), with 50% classified as vulnerable own-account workers. This situation is exacerbated by limited social protection and benefits, rendering women particularly susceptible during economic downturns. The concentration of women in precarious informal work creates a troubling pattern of economic insecurity that extends beyond individual workers to affect household stability and intergenerational economic mobility (International Labour Organization, Labour Force Trends in Small Island States: A Focus on the Maldives, 2024).

Environmental Intersectionalities Environmental vulnerabilities create disproportionate impacts across different population groups, particularly affecting those in rural areas. The outer islands face immediate exposure to climate impacts, with limited adaptation resources and weaker infrastructure resilience. By 2030, 30% of elderly households in atolls will face direct climate threats, while the prevalence of non-disaster-resistant housing particularly affects elderly and disabled residents who face additional challenges during extreme weather events (United Nations Development Programme, Developing Disaster Risk Profile for Maldives, 2020).

Women bear disproportionate environmental burdens through multiple channels. The World Bank Country Environmental Analysis 2024 documents that 76% of atoll households rely on untreated rainwater, necessitating regular emergency water supplies during dry seasons, which creates additional household management challenges.

The degradation of marine ecosystems particularly affects small-scale and subsistence fishers, with women who engage in post-harvest processing and small-scale fish trading facing economic instability as fish stocks decline. Poor sewage treatment infrastructure particularly affects those living in densely populated areas or under inadequate housing conditions, where residents have limited alternatives for sanitation services. These environmental challenges compound existing inequalities, with female-headed households, disabled individuals, elderly residents, and economically marginalized communities having fewer resources to adapt to or recover from environmental degradation (Ministry of Environment, National Strategic Framework to Mobilize International Climate Finance to Address Climate Change in the Maldives 2020-2024).

Public Debt Intersectionalities The Maldives faces a severe economic crisis with external debt servicing projected to exceed $1 billion by 2026. This mounting debt burden necessitates deep structural adjustments that will impact generations to come, compounding existing vulnerabilities and inequities while constraining investment in sustainable development and human capital. The resulting cuts to public services and social protection programmes disproportionately affect vulnerable groups who are primary beneficiaries of social welfare programmes, particularly in health, welfare, pensions, and utilities subsidies (Fitch Ratings, Maldives Downgrade Report, 2024).

Disabled individuals, elderly residents, and economically marginalised communities face heightened risks as support systems they depend on undergo systematic reductions.

As the economy contracts under debt pressure, employment and economic participation barriers intensify, particularly affecting those concentrated in the informal sector through job insecurity and wage pressures. The burden of unpaid care work intensifies with declining public services, particularly affecting women who currently spend an average of 19 hours per day on care tasks compared to men's 8.1 hours (World Bank, Gender Equality Strategy 2023-2030).

Rural communities face compound impacts as fiscal constraints reduce investment in outer island infrastructure and development projects, widening existing urban-rural disparities in service access and economic opportunities. The reduction in financial resources for development initiatives particularly affects isolated communities already struggling with limited access to essential services (Asian Development Bank, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in South Asia, 2023).

These debt-driven measures will create generational setbacks in development and equality, with profound implications for the nation's social fabric and economic resilience.

4. Marine and Environmental Ecosystem Degradation

The Maldives faces severe marine and environmental challenges centered on marine ecosystem degradation, with particularly acute impacts on vulnerable populations. The nation's marine environment demonstrates critical vulnerabilities across multiple dimensions, from widespread coral reef deterioration to mounting pollution pressures, creating compound threats to both ecological stability and human well-being (World Bank Country Environmental Analysis, 2024).

These marine and environmental challenges intersect with and amplify existing social vulnerabilities in complex ways. In the fisheries sector, which accounts for 20% of employment particularly in outer atolls, women face distinct patterns of vulnerability through their multidimensional roles (Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture, 2021). Beyond their direct involvement in fishing-related activities like harvesting, processing, and trading, women typically bear primary responsibility for household management and childcare (Wessels, 2017). This combination of paid and unpaid labor creates compounded pressures as marine resources decline. Water resource vulnerabilities and poor infrastructure disproportionately affect those living in densely populated areas or inadequate housing conditions (World Bank Country Environmental Analysis, 2024).

This section analyzes how these challenges intersect with and compound existing social vulnerabilities to create multidimensional patterns of marginalization across communities, genders, and socioeconomic groups.

4.1 Marine Ecosystem Vulnerabilities

The marine environment demonstrates critical vulnerabilities across multiple dimensions, from coral reef degradation to fisheries pressure, creating compound threats to the nation's environmental stability.

4.1.1 Coral Reef System Degradation:

The World Bank Country Analysis 2024 identifies the Maldivian reef system as the seventh largest globally, covering 2,697 to 4,510 km² (World Bank, 2024, Maldives: Country Environmental Analysis. Towards a More Sustainable and Resilient Blue Economy). The 2020 Coral Reef Assessment reveals concerning degradation patterns, with current coral cover at approximately 19.4%, representing only half of pre-2016 bleaching levels (Nooraaje, 2021, Maldives Coral Reefs Assessment). This assessment further documents a notable ecological shift from *Acropora* to more stress-tolerant *Porites* species, though spatial variation exists, with resort and uninhabited islands showing higher coral cover than inhabited islands (Nooraaje, 2021, Maldives Coral Reefs Assessment). This degradation pattern suggests fundamental shifts in reef ecosystem structure that threaten both biodiversity and coastal protection functions.

4.1.2 Marine Species Vulnerabilities:

Rich marine biodiversity, encompassing 1,100 documented fish species, faces multiple pressures from human activities and environmental change, highlighting significant vulnerabilities (World Bank, 2024, Maldives: Country Environmental Analysis. Towards a More Sustainable and Resilient Blue Economy). The 2020 Rapid Assessment identifies concerning predator population patterns, noting reef sharks in 26 of 34 survey zones (Dryden et al., 2020, A Rapid Assessment of Natural Environments in the Maldives). The same assessment highlights turtle populations facing ongoing poaching threats, particularly pronounced on uninhabited islands (Dryden et al., 2020, A Rapid Assessment of Natural Environments in the Maldives), while the 2020 Coral Reef Assessment documents significant declines in sea cucumber populations in fished areas (Nooraaje, 2021, Maldives Coral Reefs Assessment). The World Bank report further reveals doubled reef fish consumption between 2009-2018, from 4kt to 8kt, suggesting unsustainable exploitation patterns (World Bank, 2024, Maldives: Country Environmental Analysis. Towards a More Sustainable and Resilient Blue Economy).

4.2 Pollution And Waste Vulnerabilities

4.2.1   Marine Pollution Patterns

The World Bank Country Analysis 2024 reveals severe contamination through multiple pathways. The report documents approximately 600 tons of plastic waste entering waterways annually, alongside daily discharge of 15,000 m³ untreated sewage. The analysis further identifies critical sewage treatment infrastructure deficiencies, with only 15 of 66 sewer systems on local islands having treatment plants, and merely 6 remaining operational. The report's findings on pollution are particularly striking, with 80% of surveyed resorts reporting plastic waste pollution, and microplastic concentrations in some areas matching highly polluted global sites (World Bank Country Analysis 2024).

4.2.2   Waste Management Challenges

The World Bank Country Analysis 2024 identifies the Maldives as having the highest waste generation rates in South Asia, documenting tourist generation at 3.5 kg per day, Malé residents at 1.7 kg per day, and other island residents at 0.8 kg per day. The report demonstrates significant deterioration, with a 155% increase in Malé waste quantities between 2004-2014. The 2020 Rapid Assessment of Natural Environments in the Maldives notes that despite improvements in waste management infrastructure, significant coastal accumulation of plastics and polystyrene continues, creating long-term environmental degradation risks (IUCN and Government of Maldives, 2020).

4.3 Water Resource Vulnerabilities

The World Bank Country Analysis 2024 documents critical deterioration in water security through multiple impact channels. The report shows per capita renewable water resources have decreased dramatically from 300 m³/year (1964) to 55 m³/year (2020). The analysis further reveals that 76% of atoll households rely on untreated rainwater, necessitating regular emergency water supplies during dry seasons. High dependence on expensive desalination systems creates additional economic pressure while failing to address underlying resource degradation.

4.4 Management And Institutional Vulnerabilities

4.4.1   Protected Area Deficiencies

The World Bank Country Analysis 2024 reveals systematic weaknesses in both protected area coverage and management effectiveness. The report documents that only 5% of territorial waters and 1% of archipelagic waters receive protection status, while 91 Protected Areas covering 62,899 hectares show limited active management. The analysis further highlights that only 5 of 91 Protected Areas have established management plans, resulting in most protected areas functioning as "paper parks" without effective protection measures, noting that OCPP has been supporting work over recent years to improve the management effectiveness of MPAs.

4.4.2   Institutional Capacity Gaps

The World Bank Country Analysis 2024 identifies critical capacity limitations across multiple dimensions, noting the Environmental Protection Agency operates with severely constrained resources. This capacity deficit combines with fragmented institutional frameworks and weak enforcement mechanisms to create systematic management failures. Limited coordination between government agencies and insufficient funding for environmental programmes creates a perpetual implementation gap between policy goals and practical conservation outcomes.

4.5 Intersectional Vulnerabilities of Marine Degradation

In the Maldives, marine degradation, particularly the decline of coral reefs, significantly impacts vulnerable groups like coastal communities, women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities by threatening their livelihoods, access to food and water, and displacing them due to rising sea levels and coastal erosion, while also impacting their mental health and overall well-being due to the loss of their environment and cultural heritage; this is primarily because the Maldives heavily relies on tourism and fisheries, both of which are directly dependent on healthy coral reefs (United Nations Maldives: UN Expert on the Maldives Stuck Between Rock and Hard Place on Climate Change Issue, 2023).

4.6 Key impacts on vulnerable groups

Economic hardship: Loss of income from fishing and tourism, which are the main sources of livelihood for many Maldivian communities, particularly affecting those whose income is directly tied to marine activities (Ali, M. H., & Jaleel, M.

"Socioeconomic Ramifications of Sea Level Rise in the Maldives: A Holistic Assessment of Impacts and Adaptation Strategies," 2024).

Food insecurity: Reduced fish populations due to declining coral reefs, impacting food availability and access, especially for vulnerable groups who may not have the resources to diversify their diets (United Nations Maldives: UN Expert on the Maldives Stuck Between Rock and Hard Place on Climate Change Issue, 2023).

Displacement and migration: Rising sea levels and coastal erosion force communities to relocate, often leading to displacement and challenges in accessing basic services in new areas (Statement by Mr. Adam Hamid, Counsellor, Permanent Mission of the Maldives to the United Nations at the Plenary on Agenda Item 73: Oceans and Law of the Sea and Sustainable Fisheries, 2023).

Health risks: Increased exposure to waterborne diseases due to changes in water quality and sanitation issues caused by flooding.

Psychological impacts: Stress and trauma associated with environmental changes, loss of cultural heritage, and the uncertainty of their future (Borg Axisa, G., Borg, R. P., Haikal Ibrahim, M., & Nistharan, F. "Vulnerability to Disaster in the Maldives: The Maamigili and Fenfushi Island Communities," 2020).

Limited access to adaptation measures: Vulnerable groups may have less capacity to implement adaptation strategies like coastal protection due to limited resources and knowledge (Ali, M. H., & Jaleel, M. "Socioeconomic Ramifications of Sea Level Rise in the Maldives: A Holistic Assessment of Impacts and Adaptation Strategies," 2024).

5. Legislative and Institutional framework for GESI and SEAH

5.1 Constitutional Framework

The Constitution of the Maldives enshrines fundamental protections for gender equality, disability inclusion, and social inclusion. Article 17(a) guarantees the right to non-discrimination based on sex, forming the foundation for gender equality in law and practice, while Article 17(b) enables affirmative actions to address systemic disadvantages faced by women. Additionally, Article 20 ensures equal treatment under the law, safeguarding women's access to legal protections, and Article 62 mandates equal work opportunities and fair compensation, prohibiting wage discrimination. These provisions collectively create a robust constitutional framework to advance gender equality across all sectors.

The Constitution also emphasizes the inclusion of vulnerable groups. Article 17(a) extends non-discrimination to individuals with disabilities, while Article 35(b) requires the state to provide tailored support and protections for them, including reasonable workplace accommodations guaranteed under Article 37(b). Social inclusion is further reinforced by Article 35(a), which mandates special protections for vulnerable groups, and Article 36(c), which ensures the welfare of elderly persons through state and familial support. Articles 23 and 37(a) guarantee workers' rights, including foreign workers, by addressing exploitation and unsafe working conditions. Together, these constitutional provisions reflect the Maldives' commitment to equitable access, inclusivity, and the protection of marginalized communities.

5.2 National Legislation

The Maldives has developed a robust legislative framework to promote Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) while addressing systemic challenges such as workplace harassment and sexual exploitation. The Gender Equality Act (2016) lays the foundation for eliminating systemic discrimination, mandating gender-responsive budgeting and establishing quotas to enhance women's participation in decision-making. Similarly, the Domestic Violence Prevention Act (2012) and Sexual Offences Act (2014) reinforce protections for survivors of violence and abuse through legal safeguards, victim-centered judicial processes, and the establishment of support systems.

In the realm of workplace protections, the Prevention of Sexual Harassment Act (2014) requires all employers to establish complaints mechanisms, including designated redressal committees, to address and resolve incidents of harassment effectively. This measure is complemented by strict penalties for non-compliance, ensuring accountability and fostering safe work environments. Social inclusion laws, such as the Protection of the Rights of the Elderly Act (2018) and the Disability Rights Act (2010), further extend protections to vulnerable groups, ensuring equitable access to social services, employment, and education. Collectively, these laws exemplify the Maldives' commitment to fostering an inclusive society that safeguards the dignity and rights of all individuals.

Table 01 National Legislative Framework on GESI

Legislation	Key Provisions	Focus Area
Gender Equality Act (2016)	Defines and prohibits gender discrimination, mandates women's participation in planning, ensures equal pay, and requires gender-responsive budgeting.	Systemic gender equality.
Domestic Violence Prevention Act (2012)	Comprehensive abuse definition, protection orders, survivor support services, and multi-agency coordination through the Family Protection Authority.	Protection against domestic violence.
Sexual Harassment Prevention Act (2014)	Defines workplace harassment, establishes complaint mechanisms, prescribes penalties, and requires prevention policies.	Safeguarding workplace environments.
Sexual Offences Act (2014)	Defines sexual offences, prioritizes victim protection, and incorporates gender-sensitive investigations and trials.	Addressing sexual violence.
Decentralisation Act	Ensures women's representation in governance, mandates gender-responsive local policies and budgeting.	Inclusive local governance.
Family Act	Protects women's rights in marriage, divorce, custody, and matrimonial property.	Women's rights in family law.
Protection of the Rights of the Elderly Act (2018)	Guarantees social, economic, and healthcare rights, financial assistance, and mechanisms to address elder abuse.	Rights of the elderly.
National Social Protection Act (2014)	Introduces allowances for single parents, foster care, disabilities, and universal pensions for the elderly.	Social safety nets.
Employment Act	Prohibits forced labour, establishes foreign worker rights, regulates work agreements, and ensures fair hours and wages.	Labour rights and protections.

Anti-Human Trafficking Act (2013)	Defines trafficking, ensures victim-sensitive investigations, and mandates victim support and reintegration services.	Combating trafficking and support.
Protection of Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2010)	Ensures non-discrimination, mandates accessibility, inclusive education, and employment quotas for persons with disabilities.	Disability inclusion.
Special Education Needs Act	Defines special education needs, mandates inclusive practices, and ensures compliance through monitoring mechanisms.	Inclusive education.
Juvenile Justice Act (2019)	Specialized juvenile courts, rehabilitation focus, diversion programs, and post-release support systems.	Justice for juveniles.
National Social Health Insurance Act (2011)	Universal health coverage through the Aasandha scheme, with oversight and grievance mechanisms.	Healthcare for all.
Disaster Management Act (2015)	Establishes disaster preparedness measures, early warning systems, and protection for vulnerable groups.	Disaster preparedness and resilience.
Climate Emergency Act (2021)	Declares a climate emergency, mandates adaptation and mitigation, and prioritizes vulnerable community protection.	Climate action and resilience.
Immigration Act (2007, amended 2023)	Regulates migration, ensures work visa fairness, and protects migrant workers' rights.	Migration management.
National Youth Policy (2022-2030)	Focuses on youth empowerment, governance participation, economic opportunities, and well-being.	Youth development.

The Maldives demonstrates its commitment to advancing human rights and social equity through its ratification of all core UN human rights conventions, except the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. As a member of the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Maldives aligns its national labour laws with international standards to protect vulnerable workers, including women and migrant labourers. Additionally, the Maldives has pledged to uphold the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5, which focuses on gender equality, and adheres to the principles of the Beijing Platform for Action, which provides strategic objectives for women's empowerment and gender-responsive policy development.

5.3 Institutional Framework

The Maldives has established an institutional framework to operationalize its commitment to gender equality and social inclusion. Various ministries, agencies, and dedicated bodies work collaboratively to ensure the effective implementation of policies and laws.

5.4 Gender Equality

The Ministry of Social and Family Development plays a central role in promoting gender equality. Within the ministry, the Gender Division leads the formulation and implementation of gender-related policies, coordinating national efforts to advance equality. The Women's Development Section implements specific programmes and services to directly support women, while the Gender Mainstreaming Section ensures the integration of gender perspectives across all sectors, providing technical assistance to other government entities.

The Family Protection Authority (FPA) is a key institution addressing domestic violence. It leads prevention and response efforts by coordinating multi-agency approaches, operating shelter services, and providing victim support programmes. The FPA monitors the implementation of the Domestic Violence Prevention Act to ensure accountability and collaborates closely with law enforcement and the judiciary to enable an effective response to domestic violence cases.

At the local level, Women's Development Committees (WDCs) serve as critical platforms for representing women's interests. These committees ensure that women's voices are included in local governance and implement community development projects that promote women's economic empowerment. They also monitor local gender issues and provide feedback to national institutions to inform policy and programme development.

5.5 Social Inclusion

The National Social Protection Agency (NSPA) administers social protection schemes, ensuring the efficient delivery of benefits to vulnerable groups. It manages pension and allowance systems that provide financial support to single parents, persons with disabilities, and the elderly. By monitoring beneficiary needs and programme effectiveness, the NSPA enables evidence-based improvements to social protection initiatives.

The Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Information, and Arts oversees youth affairs, working to empower young people through targeted programmes and services. The National Youth Council, under the ministry's guidance, acts as an advisory body on youth policy, while Youth Centres across various atolls provide recreational and developmental opportunities. The Youth Health Café programme, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, delivers youth-specific health services in Malé, addressing critical health needs of the younger population.

The National Disability Council coordinates the implementation of disability policies, adopting a cross-sector approach to ensure inclusivity. It monitors compliance with disability laws, reviews accessibility standards, and manages the national disability registration system, enabling targeted support for persons with disabilities. Complementing its work, the Disability Support Services Unit under the NSPA administers the disability allowance programme, coordinates support services, and reviews accommodation requests to facilitate access and ensure quality service delivery.

The Ministry of Economic Development oversees labour and employment matters, providing strategic direction for workforce development and economic inclusion. It collaborates with the Labour Relations Authority, which enforces employment rights by inspecting workplaces, investigating complaints, and ensuring compliance with labour laws. The Labour Relations Authority also monitors the conditions of foreign workers to prevent exploitation.

The Maldives Immigration Department plays a vital role in managing work visas and permits for foreign workers, ensuring orderly migration processes. Employment-related disputes are addressed by the Employment Tribunal, which provides legal remedies and ensures the fair resolution of workplace conflicts.

5.6 Significant Gaps in Legislative and Institutional Framework for Ensuring GESI

The Maldives has made progress in promoting Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI), but critical legislative and institutional gaps remain, undermining the effectiveness of these efforts. Gender vulnerabilities persist due to the lack of legal frameworks addressing unpaid care work, workplace harassment in informal sectors, and economic empowerment opportunities for women, particularly on the outer islands (Human Rights Commission of the Maldives [HRCM], Monitoring Report on SEAH Compliance in the Maldives, 2021; Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services [MoGFSS], Status Report on Violence Against Women and Children, 2020). These gaps perpetuate economic inequalities and reinforce geographic disparities. Women with disabilities face compounded vulnerabilities, with no intersectional legislation addressing multiple forms of discrimination (NGO Coalition on Human Rights, Stakeholder Submission for the Universal Periodic Review of the Maldives, 2020). Weak enforcement systems further limit the effectiveness of existing gender equality laws, leaving protections largely aspirational (HRCM, Monitoring Report on SEAH Compliance in the Maldives, 2021).

On social inclusion, the Maldives faces significant challenges in ensuring equitable access to services and opportunities across its dispersed geography. Rural areas experience systemic neglect, with limited legal frameworks addressing urban-rural disparities (MoGFSS, Status Report on Violence Against Women and Children, 2020). Housing insecurity exacerbates these divides, with inadequate social housing programs and insufficient provisions for accessible housing for persons with disabilities (MoGFSS, COVID-19 Impact Assessment on Gender-Based Violence in the Maldives, 2021). Gaps in pension coverage for informal sector workers and underdeveloped elderly care standards further heighten vulnerabilities among disadvantaged populations (MoGFSS, Status Report on Violence Against Women and Children, 2020). Similarly, mental health services, rehabilitation programs, and substance abuse treatments remain under-resourced and poorly implemented, disproportionately impacting marginalized groups (HRCM, Annual Report on the Status of Human Rights in the Maldives, 2020).

Despite the existence of legislation addressing Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment (SEAH), enforcement and monitoring mechanisms remain weak. For instance, workplace harassment in both formal and informal sectors often goes unaddressed due to limited accountability systems and a lack of implementation capacity (HRCM, Monitoring Report on SEAH Compliance in the Maldives, 2021). Migrant workers, who constitute a significant portion of the labor force, face exploitation due to insufficient protections against wage theft, unsafe working conditions, and recruitment-related abuses (International Labour Organization [ILO], Migrant Labour in the Maldives: Rights, Challenges, and Opportunities, 2021). Overall,

fragmented institutional coordination and weak oversight hinder the effectiveness of GESI policies, while legislative backsliding threatens to erode existing social protections (NGO Coalition on Human Rights, Stakeholder Submission for the Universal Periodic Review of the Maldives, 2020). Addressing these gaps is essential for achieving equitable development and safeguarding vulnerable populations in the Maldives.

6. SEAH Risk analysis

Sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment (SEAH) remain pervasive and under-addressed vulnerabilities in the Maldives, particularly impacting women, youth, migrant workers, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups. These issues are exacerbated by entrenched gender inequalities, socio-cultural norms, and systemic gaps in legislative and institutional frameworks. Despite the introduction of laws such as the Prevention of Sexual Harassment and Abuse Act (2014), enforcement and awareness remain limited, perpetuating the risks faced by vulnerable populations (Shadow Report to the UN Committee on CEDAW, HRCM, 2019).

Women in the Maldives experience significant SEAH risks, with national data revealing that one in three women has been subjected to some form of violence (Gender-Based Violence in the Maldives: Trends and Impacts, UNFPA, 2020). These vulnerabilities are often dismissed as private family matters, reflecting deep-seated patriarchal norms and cultural stigmatization (Annual Report on the Status of Human Rights in the Maldives, HRCM, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the risks of violence escalated, with women aged 19–40 being four times more likely than men to report physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, compounded by financial and emotional stressors (COVID-19 Impact Assessment on Gender-Based Violence in the Maldives, Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services, 2021). The *Prevention of Sexual Harassment and Abuse Act* mandates that organizations with more than 30 employees establish workplace harassment prevention committees to facilitate complaints and redress. While this legislation is critical for ensuring accountability, cultural barriers, low awareness, and inadequate enforcement hinder its effectiveness. The Human Rights Commission of the Maldives (HRCM) has monitored compliance with the Act, yet its efforts have been constrained by insufficient institutional capacity (Monitoring Report on SEAH Compliance in the Maldives, HRCM, 2021).

Rural women face compounded vulnerabilities due to geographic isolation and limited access to support services. *The* Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services operates in only 20 of the 189 inhabited islands, leaving a vast majority of women without access to essential resources, such as shelters, legal aid, or psychological

support (Status Report on Violence Against Women and Children, Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services, 2020). Caseworkers are overburdened, handling 70–80 cases each compared to the recommended 25–30, further highlighting the systemic barriers to providing effective support (Annual Report on the Status of Human Rights in the Maldives, HRCM, 2020). Women with disabilities experience even greater risks, with NGOs estimating that 10% of this population has been subjected to SEAH (Stakeholder Submission for the Universal Periodic Review of the Maldives, NGO Coalition on Human Rights, 2020). Alarmingly, between 40% and 60% of women with disabilities, especially those who are visually impaired, have reported sexual abuse. These cases often go unaddressed due to inaccessible police and judicial systems, which deter families from reporting incidents (Shadow Report to the UN Committee on CEDAW, HRCM, 2019).

Youth in the Maldives also face significant SEAH risks. Research indicates that approximately 15% of adolescents have experienced sexual abuse, with rates among girls being double those of boys (Child Protection and SEAH Risks in the Maldives: A Situational Analysis, UNICEF, 2020). Nearly one-third of girls in secondary schools report having been sexually abused, reflecting broader societal power imbalances and insufficient protective mechanisms (Monitoring Report on SEAH Compliance in the Maldives, HRCM, 2021). The stigma surrounding premarital sexual activity, which remains illegal in the Maldives, further restricts access to reproductive health services for unmarried youth, leaving them more vulnerable to exploitation (Gender-Based Violence in the Maldives: Trends and Impacts, UNFPA, 2020). For children, the situation is equally concerning, with half experiencing some form of emotional or physical punishment. In 2017, there were 165 children in state care due to abuse, and additional recent data reveals incidents of blackmail, exploitation, forced labor, and cyberbullying among minors (Status Report on Violence Against Women and Children, Ministry of Gender, Family, and Social Services, 2020).

Migrant workers are among the most marginalized groups in the Maldives, facing systemic exploitation and abuse. Comprising approximately 179,000 individuals, of whom 63,000 are undocumented, this group experiences physical and verbal abuse, workplace discrimination, and limited access to medical services (Migrant Labour in the Maldives: Rights, Challenges, and Opportunities, ILO, 2021). Surveys show that 18% of migrant workers report abuse, 45% of documented workers face workplace discrimination, and 38% have had their passports confiscated by employers (Monitoring Report on SEAH Compliance in the Maldives, HRCM, 2021). Female domestic workers are especially vulnerable due to isolated working conditions, which leave them without effective recourse to justice or support systems (Migrant Labour in the Maldives: Rights, Challenges, and Opportunities, ILO, 2021).

The systemic gaps in SEAH prevention and response frameworks exacerbate these vulnerabilities. The lack of adequate geographic coverage by the *Ministry of Gender*, combined with under-resourced support systems, limits survivors' access to justice

and essential services (Annual Report on the Status of Human Rights in the Maldives, HRCM, 2020). Geographic disparities further intensify the challenges, as communities in remote islands remain underserved compared to Malé. Migrant workers, rural women, and persons with disabilities face particularly high barriers to accessing legal protections and redress mechanisms. Although laws like the Prevention of Sexual Harassment and Abuse Act *and the* Sexual Offenses Act provide a strong foundation, their enforcement is inconsistent, and many survivors lack the awareness or trust needed to engage with these systems (Shadow Report to the UN Committee on CEDAW, HRCM, 2019).

7. Existing Initiatives with GESI and SEAH Considerations in the Environment Sector

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) is a framework designed to ensure that projects are fair, inclusive, and respectful of people's diverse identities, experiences, and backgrounds. In the context of the environmental sector in the Maldives, GESI integration is essential to address issues of inequality in marine conservation, biodiversity protection, pollution management, and climate adaptation efforts. Ensuring that diverse voices are represented in environmental initiatives contributes to more sustainable and equitable outcomes.

To evaluate the integration of GESI frameworks in some of environmental projects carried out in the Maldives, a review was conducted on 9 selected projects. These projects include initiatives addressing climate resilience, marine biodiversity conservation, and pollution management, implemented through the Government of Maldives and supported by international agencies and development partners. The projects were identified through traingulation of publicly available information, interviews with project leaders, and administration of a questionnaire.This review aims to provide a snapshot of how these projects incorporate GESI principles and highlights gaps and opportunities for improvement in ensuring inclusivity within the environmental sector.

Table 02 Existing Initiatives With GESI and SEAH Considerations

Project Name	Donor/Implementing Agency	GESI Integration	SEAH-Specific Measures	Key Gaps/Best Practices	Key Partners
Strengthening Gender-Inclusive Initiatives Project **Visit ADB**	Asian Development Bank (ADB), Japan Special Fund, ADB Technical Assistance Special Fund	Explicitly integrates gender inclusion across initiatives, focusing on leadership roles and equitable access.	Includes SEAH-specific measures such as grievance redress systems and community education.	Comprehensive integration of GESI and SEAH, setting a benchmark for other projects. Strong collaboration among the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services (MGFSS), Family Protection Authority (FPA), Maldives Bureau of Statistics (MBS), and civil society organizations. Includes grant schemes to support community-driven efforts.	Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services (MGFSS), Family Protection Authority (FPA), Maldives Bureau of Statistics (MBS), Civil society organizations
Manta Trust Ocean Women Programme **Visit Manta Trust**	Manta Trust, Reef Trust, Local NGOs	Promotes women's leadership in marine conservation through capacity-building programmes and creating opportunities for women to engage in marine biodiversity research.	Focuses on empowering women in communities heavily dependent on marine resources, ensuring their participation in decision-making.	Addresses cultural barriers to women's participation in conservation activities, providing mentorship and creating safe spaces for women in traditionally male-dominated sectors.	Manta Trust, Local Councils, Ministry of Fisheries, Marine Resources and Agriculture, Civil society organizations

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Waste to Wealth Project Visit World [Bank](#)	UNDP Maldives, Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Technology	Focuses on sustainable waste management and recycling initiatives, with particular emphasis on engaging vulnerable groups, including women and persons with disabilities, in economic activities related to waste management.	Provides training and livelihood opportunities for women and marginalized groups in waste collection and recycling. Includes SEAH policies to protect workers in these sectors.	Addresses economic vulnerabilities by creating income-generating opportunities for disadvantaged groups. However, it lacks strong monitoring mechanisms to ensure SEAH compliance in informal waste management sectors.	UNDP Maldives, Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Technology, Local Councils, Waste Management Companies
Coral Restoration Programme Visit [Maldives](#) Coral Institue	Maldives Coral Institute, USAID, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)	Engages local communities, particularly youth and women, in coral restoration activities, promoting gender-sensitive approaches to marine conservation.	Provides SEAH training for project staff and volunteers, ensuring a safe working environment in field-based activities.	Strengthens community ownership of conservation projects but needs more robust GESI monitoring frameworks to track gender and inclusion outcomes.	Maldives Coral Institute, IUCN, Local Councils, Civil society organizations

Sustainable Fisheries Development Project Visit Ministry of Fisheries, Marine Resources and Agriculture	World Bank, Ministry of Fisheries, Marine Resources and Agriculture	Incorporates gender-responsive policies in fisheries management, aiming to improve women's participation in decision-making processes within the fisheries sector.	Provides SEAH protocols and training for stakeholders involved in fisheries-related projects.	Addresses gaps in women's representation in fisheries governance but requires stronger enforcement of GESI principles at the community level.	Ministry of Fisheries, Marine Resources and Agriculture, World Bank, Local Fisher Associations
Maldives Marine Plastic Management Project Visit Ministry of Tourism and Environment	Parley for the Oceans, Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Technology	Focuses on reducing marine plastic pollution by engaging local communities, particularly youth and women, in plastic collection, recycling, and awareness campaigns.	Includes SEAH protocols for community engagement activities, ensuring safe and respectful interactions.	Promotes community ownership of plastic management initiatives and raises awareness of environmental impacts. However, it lacks strong mechanisms to ensure long-term sustainability of these efforts.	Parley for the Oceans, Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Technology, Local Councils, Civil society organizations

Fisaari Kanbalun (Ocean Guardians) Project Visit Empower Ocean	Empower Ocean, Maldives Marine Research Institute, Local Communities	Aims to build community resilience to marine pollution and climate change by empowering local communities, particularly women and youth, to take an active role in marine conservation.	Incorporates SEAH measures through training programs on safeguarding, community protection protocols, and grievance redress mechanisms.	Strengthens local ownership of marine protection efforts, addressing gaps in marine pollution awareness and climate adaptation at the community level. Needs more robust long-term monitoring frameworks for GESI outcomes.	Empower Ocean, Maldives Marine Research Institute, Local Councils, Civil society organizations
Together for Her: Building a Future Free of Violence Visit UNDP Maldives	UN Maldives, Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services, FPA	Aims to address gender-based violence by providing safe spaces, access to services, and community education to empower survivors and prevent violence.	Incorporates SEAH-specific measures, including safe reporting mechanisms, survivor support services, and safeguarding protocols.	Addresses gaps in services for survivors of gender-based violence but requires stronger outreach to marginalized communities. Promotes GESI principles by ensuring access to services for women and vulnerable populations.	UN Maldives, Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services, Family Protection Authority (FPA), Civil society organizations
Miyaru Project Visit Miyaru Project	Miyaru, Environmental NGOs, Local Communities	Focuses on shark and marine biodiversity conservation in the Maldives through community engagement and awareness-raising initiatives.	Incorporates SEAH policies to ensure safe and respectful community interactions during fieldwork	Addresses gaps in marine biodiversity awareness, particularly among youth and local communities, promoting sustainable marine conservation practices.	Miyaru, Local Councils, Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Technology, Civil society organizations

			and educational programs.		

8. Recommendations For GESI and SEAH Integration

8.1 **Community-Based Engagement in Conservation Efforts**: Environmental projects should actively involve local communities, with a focus on engaging women, youth, and marginalized groups. By ensuring their participation in biodiversity conservation and pollution management, OCPP can promote leadership and empowerment in traditionally excluded groups.

Recommended Actions:

I. Partner with local councils, Women's Development Committees (WDCs), and community organizations to co-design MPA management plans and marine pollution reduction strategies.

II. Conduct regular community consultations to ensure ongoing engagement and feedback.

III. Prioritize initiatives that address community-identified issues, such as waste management, pollution control, and biodiversity conservation.

Example: The Manta Trust Ocean Women Programme demonstrates how engaging women in marine biodiversity research can promote leadership and empowerment within communities.

8.2 **Safeguarding Mechanisms in Marine and Biodiversity Projects:** Incorporating SEAH safeguarding measures into marine conservation and pollution management projects is essential to creating safe and respectful working environments.

Recommended Actions:

I. Develop clear reporting mechanisms for SEAH incidents and ensure these are communicated to all stakeholders.

II. Introduce codes of conduct for project staff and volunteers, with mandatory SEAH training sessions tailored to marine and biodiversity contexts.

III. Include community education components on safeguarding practices in conservation and pollution outreach activities.

Example: The Together for Her project showcases best practices in providing safe spaces and survivor support services, which can be adapted to conservation projects.

8.3 **Capacity-Building Initiatives for Marine Conservation:** Building capacity within coastal communities to address GESI and SEAH gaps is crucial for the long-term sustainability of marine conservation and pollution management efforts.

Recommended Actions:

I. Provide skills training and leadership programs for women and youth in MPA management, marine biodiversity conservation, and sustainable waste management.

II. Offer technical support to local councils and WDCs on integrating GESI and SEAH principles into environmental initiatives.

III. Create mentorship programs to foster ongoing support and knowledge-sharing within communities.

Example: The Sustainable Fisheries Development Project offers a model for promoting women's participation in environmental management through targeted capacity-building efforts.

8.4 **Inclusive Economic Opportunities in Marine and Pollution Sectors**: Environmental projects can create livelihood opportunities for marginalized groups, particularly women and persons with disabilities, in ways that align with biodiversity and pollution management goals.

Recommended Actions:

I. Launch community-based eco-tourism or marine conservation businesses that provide employment opportunities for local women and youth.

II. Support waste-to-wealth initiatives that turn plastic and other waste into valuable products, engaging vulnerable groups in the process.

III. Ensure that economic opportunities created by projects are accessible to all community members, with targeted outreach to marginalized groups.

Example: The Waste to Wealth Project highlights how waste management can provide livelihood opportunities for women and persons with disabilities, contributing to both environmental sustainability and social inclusion.

8.5 **Monitoring and Evaluation of GESI and SEAH Integration**: Ongoing monitoring and evaluation are essential to ensure that GESI and SEAH principles are upheld throughout a project's lifecycle.

Recommended Actions:

I. Establish gender-sensitive monitoring frameworks that track both quantitative and qualitative project outcomes in MPAs and pollution reduction initiatives.

II. Conduct regular evaluations to assess the effectiveness of GESI and SEAH measures and make necessary adjustments.

III. Ensure that monitoring data is disaggregated by gender, age, and other relevant factors to provide a comprehensive understanding of project impact.

Example: Regular use of the GESI and SEAH Questionnaire ensures that projects are evaluated systematically and adjustments are made to improve inclusivity and safeguarding practices.

8.6 **Addressing Vulnerabilities in Marine Conservation and Pollution Management**: Significant gaps remain in addressing the needs of vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, persons with disabilities, and migrant workers, within marine and biodiversity projects.

Recommended Actions:

I. Expand the scope of marine conservation projects to include targeted interventions for elderly community members, such as intergenerational knowledge-sharing programs.

II. Develop inclusive strategies to engage persons with disabilities in conservation activities, ensuring accessibility and accommodations at project sites.

III. Create specific outreach programs for migrant workers, ensuring they have access to safeguarding mechanisms and opportunities to participate in marine and pollution initiatives.

Example: The Inclusive Green Infrastructure Initiative in Indonesia demonstrates how environmental projects can engage marginalized groups effectively through accessibility audits, intergenerational workshops, and targeted outreach efforts.

8.7 **Strengthening Local Governance for GESI and SEAH**: Empowering local councils and WDCs is critical for integrating GESI and mitigating SEAH risks in marine and biodiversity projects.

Recommended Actions:

I. Provide targeted training programs on GESI integration, SEAH prevention, and complaint handling for local councils and WDCs.

II. Support WDCs in establishing independent complaints and redress bodies to handle SEAH grievances effectively.

III. Collaborate with local councils and WDCs to design and implement community-specific frameworks that integrate GESI and SEAH safeguards into marine conservation projects.

Example: The establishment of complaint and redress mechanisms within the Together for Her project demonstrates how empowering local bodies can address SEAH concerns and foster community trust.

9. Conclusion

This report underscores the importance of integrating Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) principles and mitigating Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment (SEAH) risks in the context of biodiversity conservation and marine pollution management in the Maldives.

The findings and recommendations provided in this report offer a comprehensive framework for enhancing inclusivity and safeguarding within environmental projects. By identifying the most vulnerable groups, such as women, persons with disabilities, migrant workers, and the elderly, and understanding their intersectional challenges, this report highlights the need for tailored interventions. Existing initiatives have been evaluated to draw lessons that can inform OCPP's approach, emphasizing the importance of community engagement, capacity building, and inclusive economic opportunities.

The recommendations section presents actionable strategies to align biodiversity and marine pollution efforts with GESI and SEAH objectives. These include fostering community-led conservation, implementing safeguarding mechanisms, and strengthening local governance through partnerships with councils and Women's Development Committees (WDCs). By embedding these principles into monitoring

frameworks and expanding outreach to vulnerable populations, OCPP can ensure that their initiatives are sustainable, equitable, and effective.

Ultimately, this report aims to serve as a practical guide for OCPP to navigate the complexities of GESI and SEAH in the Maldivian context. By adopting these insights, the programs can not only achieve their ecological goals but also contribute meaningfully to the socio-economic resilience and well-being of coastal communities. Through collaboration and inclusive practices, OCPP have the opportunity to set a benchmark for socially and environmentally responsible conservation efforts in the Maldives and beyond.

10. Appendices

10.1 Glossary

10.1.1   Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI)

A comprehensive framework that seeks to ensure equitable opportunities, access, and participation for all individuals, particularly marginalized groups such as women, persons with disabilities, youth, and rural populations. GESI focuses on dismantling systemic barriers and addressing intersecting vulnerabilities.

10.1.2   Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment (SEAH)

A term encompassing acts of sexual misconduct, including exploitation, harassment, and abuse, typically targeting vulnerable populations. SEAH highlights power imbalances in professional, community, and crisis settings, and underscores the need for robust safeguards and survivor-centric approaches.

10.1.3   Intersectionality

A framework that analyzes how overlapping social identities—such as gender, race, disability, and economic status—create compounded experiences of discrimination or privilege. It is central to understanding how multiple vulnerabilities intersect in shaping systemic inequalities.

10.1.4   Transformative Adaptation

A progressive approach to climate resilience that not only addresses immediate vulnerabilities but also seeks to fundamentally transform social, economic, and

governance structures to ensure long-term, inclusive resilience. This contrasts with incremental adaptation by targeting systemic root causes of inequities.

10.1.5 Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA)

A policy and programmatic framework that integrates the principles of human rights—such as accountability, non-discrimination, participation, and empowerment—into all stages of planning and implementation. HRBA ensures that interventions prioritize the rights of marginalized populations.

10.1.6 Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction (DiDRR)

Strategies aimed at ensuring that disaster preparedness and response initiatives are accessible to persons with disabilities. DiDRR includes inclusive planning, accessible evacuation procedures, and community-led approaches to reduce risks for people with diverse needs.

10.1.7 Community-Driven Adaptation (CDA)

An approach to climate resilience that emphasizes the leadership and participation of local communities in designing and implementing solutions. CDA ensures that programs address localized needs and priorities, fostering ownership and sustainability.

10.1.8 Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB)

A financial management practice that integrates gender perspectives into budgetary processes. GRB ensures equitable allocation of resources, targeting areas where women and marginalized groups are most affected by systemic inequalities.

10.1.9 Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E)

A collaborative process involving stakeholders, including marginalized groups, in the evaluation of projects. PM&E ensures inclusivity, accountability, and transparency in measuring the effectiveness of programs and policies.

10.1.10 Climate-Resilient Infrastructure

Infrastructure designed to withstand and adapt to the impacts of climate change, such as rising sea levels, extreme weather, and environmental degradation. Such

infrastructure often includes features tailored to the needs of vulnerable populations, ensuring equitable benefits.

10.1.11 Nature-Based Solutions (NbS)

Sustainable interventions that leverage natural systems to address societal challenges, such as climate change and disaster risks. Examples include mangrove restoration, coral reef protection, and wetland conservation, which provide both ecological and socio-economic benefits.

10.1.12 Safeguards

Policies and mechanisms designed to protect vulnerable populations from exploitation, abuse, and harm during the implementation of development projects. Safeguards include grievance redress systems, anti-harassment codes of conduct, and transparent reporting mechanisms.

10.1.13 Social Vulnerability

The degree to which individuals or communities are susceptible to harm due to external stressors, such as climate change or economic instability. Factors contributing to social vulnerability include poverty, lack of education, limited healthcare access, and geographic isolation.

10.1.14 Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Any harmful act directed at individuals based on their gender, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse. GBV disproportionately affects women and girls and often increases in crisis or disaster situations.

10.1.15 SEAH Grievance Redress Mechanism (GRM)

A structured system allowing individuals to report incidents of SEAH safely and confidentially. GRMs are essential for ensuring accountability and providing survivors with access to justice and support services.

10.1.16 Sustainable Livelihoods

Economic activities that are resilient to shocks, such as climate change or market fluctuations, and provide equitable opportunities for marginalized populations. Sustainable livelihoods focus on long-term economic security while safeguarding environmental resources.

10.1.17 Marginalized Populations

Groups that are excluded from mainstream social, economic, and political activities due to systemic barriers. Marginalized populations in the Maldives include women, persons with disabilities, youth, the elderly, and rural island communities.

10.1.18 Sectoral Vulnerability Assessment

An analysis of how climate change impacts specific sectors, such as fisheries, tourism, and agriculture, with a focus on identifying vulnerabilities experienced by marginalized groups within those sectors.

10.1.19 Gender-Sensitive Indicators

Metrics used to measure progress toward gender equality and social inclusion goals. These indicators assess factors like women's participation in decision-making, access to resources, and reduction in gender disparities.

10.2 Stakeholders Consulted - organisations

Government Representatives

    6 staff from Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSFD)

International Development Partners

    Project Management Specialist, USAID

    3 staff from UNDP

Local Coucils and WDC

    Hinnavaru Island Council

    Hinnavaru WDC

    Baa Atoll Council

    Shaviyani Atoll Council

    Fuah Mulah City Council

    Fuah Mulah City WDC

    Noonu Kudafari Island Council

    Noonu Kendhukulhudhoo Island Council

    Vaavu Atoll Council

    Alif Alif Bodufulhadhoo Island Council

    Kulhudhuffushi City Council

    Nolhivaram Island Council

    Addu City Council

Organizations:

    Aloha Ufa Watersports

    Ministry of Social and Family Development

Women in Fuvamulah

Salted Ventures Swimmers

Miyaru Project

Women's Foootball Cub

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World Bank (2023). Maldives Country Environmental Analysis: Key Highlights. Retrieved from World Bank Publications.10.4 GESI Questionnaire

Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) and Sexual Exploitaton Abuse and Harassment (SEAH) Implementation Assessment

NOTES:

- Questionnaire on how organisations implement GESI principles and practices in their work with communities, including their approaches to mainstreaming gender equality and social inclusion across programmes and activities.
- The questionnaire is intended to be both an investigative and pedagogical tool, serving the dual purpose of data collection and participant learning
- interview will take approximately 20-30 minutes

Section 1: Analysis and Design

Was a gender and social analysis conducted during the project's planning phase?

1. Yes
2. No

Were specific vulnerabilities (e.g., gender, rural communities, disability, youth, elderly, foreign migrant workers, and SEAH risks) identified in project design?

1. Yes
2. No

Does the project action plan include clear GESI and SEAH goals with allocated resources?

1. Yes
2. No

Section 2: Target Groups and Engagement

Who are your main target beneficiaries? *(Select all that apply)*

1. Women
2. Rural communities
3. Youth
4. Elderly
5. Persons with disabilities (PWDs)
6. Foreign migrant workers
7. Other marginalized groups

How do you ensure the inclusion of marginalized groups in your activities? *(Open-ended response)*

What specific approaches do you use to ensure*(Open-ended response)***:**

1. Women's participation
2. Inclusion of rural communities
3. Engagement of youth
4. Participation of elderly individuals
5. Inclusion of persons with disabilities (PWDs)
6. Inclusion of foreign migrant workers

What percentage of consultation participants are from these target groups (e.g., women, rural communities, youth, elderly, PWDs, foreign migrant workers)?

1. None
2. 0–25%
3. 26–50%
4. 51–75%
5. 76–100%

To what extent do these target groups influence project decision-making?

1. Not at all
2. Low
3. Moderate
4. High

Section 3: SEAH Safeguards

Are SEAH prevention mechanisms (e.g., reporting systems, codes of conduct) in place and operational?

1. Yes
2. No

Are SEAH risks and reporting mechanisms clearly communicated to stakeholders and communities?

1. Yes
2. No

Section 4: Monitoring and Evaluation

Are gender-sensitive and inclusion-specific metrics part of the project's monitoring framework?

1. Yes
2. No

Have there been observable changes in community attitudes or practices related to gender equality and inclusion as a result of the project?

1. None
2. Some
3. Significant

Have any policies or practices been adopted as a result of the project to enhance gender equality and inclusion?

1. Yes
2. No

10.5 Rationale for the GESI and SEAH Assessment Questionnaire

The GESI and SEAH Assessment Questionnaire is designed to evaluate how effectively projects integrate Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) and Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment (SEAH) considerations across their life cycle. The structure and content are rooted in key indicators that align with the unique socio-cultural and economic context of the Maldives, ensuring actionable insights for fostering inclusivity, resilience, and safeguarding. Additionally, the questionnaire aligns with Ocean Country Partnership Programme (OCPP) GESI mainstreaming requirements, supporting projects in progressing from GESI Unaware to GESI Transformative.

The questionnaire is designed to be GESI Transformative, adding indicators that indicators address systemic inequalities, fosters cultural shifts, and sustains long-term inclusion. This GESI Transformative level elevates projects beyond compliance, embedding systemic change and empowering marginalized groups as leaders of their development.

Section 1: Analysis and Design

Justification:
This section evaluates whether projects intentionally integrate GESI and SEAH considerations during the planning phase. Identifying systemic barriers and allocating resources ensures that project interventions are proactive and preventive.

Key Indicators Addressed:

1. Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis:
   - Assesses the extent to which systemic barriers (e.g., gender norms, poverty, disability) are identified.
   - Provides a foundation for addressing SEAH risks in project design.

2. Vulnerabilities and SEAH Risks:
   - Identifies the inclusion of intersecting vulnerabilities (e.g., rural communities, migrant workers) as a focus area.
   - Ensures SEAH risks are prioritized to prevent harm.

3. Resource Allocation:
   - Evaluates whether projects allocate financial and human resources for GESI and SEAH interventions.

Alignment with OCPP Levels:

- GESI Unaware: No social and gender analysis is conducted, risking reinforcement of inequalities.

- GESI Sensitive: Basic analysis ensures interventions "do no harm" and identifies SEAH risks.

- GESI Empowering: Comprehensive analysis promotes equality in access and resource allocation.

Rationale:

Integrating these indicators ensures that projects adopt a rights-based approach, addressing systemic inequalities and safeguarding marginalized groups early in the project lifecycle.

Section 2: Target Groups and Engagement

Justification:

This section measures the inclusivity and representation of marginalized groups (e.g., women, rural communities, at risk youth? youth, elderly, PWDs, foreign migrant workers) in project activities. It assesses the breadth and depth of engagement and captures qualitative and quantitative insights.

Key Indicators Addressed:

1. Target Beneficiaries:

   o Tracks which marginalized groups are prioritized in project activities.

   o Aligns with intersectional approaches to address overlapping vulnerabilities.

2. Inclusivity Strategies:

   o Evaluates specific methods used to ensure participation and inclusion across diverse groups.

   o Captures qualitative insights into the effectiveness of participatory approaches.

3. Consultation Metrics:

   o Measures the inclusion of marginalized groups in consultations.

   o Identifies which marginalized groups are represented during consultations.

   o Assesses the degree of influence marginalized groups have on decision-making processes.

Alignment with OCPP Levels:

- GESI Unaware: Projects fail to consult marginalized groups.

- **GESI Sensitive:** Includes consultations with marginalized groups but limits influence.
- **GESI Empowering:** Promotes leadership and decision-making power among marginalized groups.

Rationale:
Meaningful engagement ensures that project outcomes are equitable and inclusive. This section ensures that projects are representative of the communities they serve while addressing barriers to participation.

Section 3: SEAH Safeguards

Justification:
This section assesses the presence, accessibility, and operationalization of SEAH prevention and response mechanisms, which are central to creating safe project environments.

Key Indicators Addressed:

1. SEAH Prevention Mechanisms:
   - Evaluates whether mechanisms like reporting systems and codes of conduct are in place and operational.
   - Assesses the implementation of SEAH safeguards.

2. Communication of SEAH Risks:
   - Measures whether SEAH risks and safeguarding procedures are clearly communicated to stakeholders and communities.

Alignment with OCPP Levels:

- **Non-Compliant:** SEAH risks are unaddressed, and reporting channels are absent.
- **Compliant:** Safeguarding risks are identified, and reporting channels are accessible.

Rationale:
These indicators ensure that safeguarding mechanisms are accessible, survivor-centered, and effectively communicated, aligning with OCPP compliant requirements.

Section 4: Monitoring and Evaluation

Justification:
This section evaluates the effectiveness of project interventions in achieving GESI and SEAH objectives and tracks progress toward systemic and cultural changes.

Key Indicators Addressed:

1. Monitoring Frameworks:

   - o Ensures gender-sensitive and inclusion-specific metrics are integrated into monitoring systems.

   - o Tracks project outcomes against established GESI goals.

2. Community Attitudes:

   - o Measures observable shifts in community perceptions of gender equality and inclusion.

   - o Assesses the extent to which projects influence norms and attitudes.

3. Adoption of Policies:

   - o Captures whether project interventions result in institutional changes that enhance gender equality and inclusion.

Alignment with OCPP Levels:

- GESI Unaware: No metrics or data disaggregation to track interventions' impacts.

- GESI Sensitive: Logframes include disaggregated data to track outcomes.

- GESI Empowering: Tracks systemic change through qualitative and quantitative methods.

Rationale:
By tracking both immediate impacts and long-term systemic changes, this section provides actionable insights into the effectiveness of GESI and SEAH interventions.

Section 5: Indicators for GESI Transformative

Justification:
The GESI Transformative level goes beyond addressing immediate needs by institutionalizing inclusive practices, fostering cultural shifts, and empowering marginalized groups. It targets systemic change for long-term sustainability.

Key Indicators Addressed:

1. Systemic Change:

   - o Evidence of institutionalizing inclusive policies and practices in project design and implementation.

   - o Integration of GESI-specific accountability measures into governance structures.

2. Cultural Norm Shifts:

- Observable changes in community perceptions and behaviors toward gender roles and inclusion.

- Increased acceptance of marginalized groups in leadership and decision-making roles.

3. Empowerment:

- Tracks the inclusion of women and marginalized groups in leadership roles.

- Monitors the establishment of new leadership opportunities for marginalized groups.

- Identifies the expansion of economic opportunities provided to marginalized groups (e.g., access to jobs, training, or resources).

4. Resource Redistribution:

- Reduction in unpaid care burdens through systemic infrastructure changes (e.g., childcare, eldercare).

- Equitable distribution of project benefits across marginalized communities.

5. Capacity for Sustained Change:

- Establishment of community-led mechanisms to monitor and promote GESI and SEAH compliance.

- Long-term partnerships with civil society organizations (CSOs) to sustain inclusion efforts.

Global Standards Informing GESI Transformative Indicators:

- UK FCDO's Systems Change Pillar: Focus on dismantling systemic barriers for sustained inclusivity.

- CARE's GESI Framework: Emphasis on transforming structures and relationships.

- OECD-DAC's Intersectionality Lens: Addressing overlapping vulnerabilities.

- UN Women's Gender Mainstreaming Approach: Ensures integration at all stages of policy and program development.

- World Bank's Gender Equality Strategy (2023–2030): Narrowing gender gaps in leadership and economic participation.

- Triple R Framework: Recognize, Reduce, and Redistribute unpaid care burdens.

- Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA): Embeds participation, accountability, and empowerment principles.

The addition of GESI Transformative indicators elevates the assessment tool to address root causes of inequality and systemic barriers, ensuring projects contribute to long-term, sustainable change. By aligning with global best practices and tailoring to the Maldives' context, this comprehensive framework ensures that projects are inclusive, equitable, and transformative.