

ASSESSMENT ON GENDER DYNAMICS IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Insights from Female Council Members



Local Government Authority



Maldives Institute of Local Governance



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The Maldives Institute of Local Governance (MILG) is the training arm of the Local Government Authority (LGA), established to support the LGA's mission of enhancing local governance. MILG's primary mission is to fulfill the LGA's core responsibility, as outlined in the Decentralization Act, which is to build the capacity of local councils.



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Final Report

**Assessment on Gender Dynamics
in Local Governance**

Insights from Female Council Members

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
EC	Elections Commission
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GEAP	National Gender Equality Action Plan
LGA	Local Government Authority
MoCLP	Ministry of Cities, Local Government and Public Works
MSFD	Ministry of Social and Family Development
NGO	Non-governmental Organisations
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OPD	Organisations of Persons with Disabilities
PWD	Persons with Disabilities
SG	Secretary-General
TSM	Temporary Special Measures
WDC	Women's Development Committee
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The 8th amendment to the Decentralisation Act of Maldives introduced a temporary special measure (TSM) ensuring the participation of women in local governance. This guaranteed 33% reserved seats for women in the local councils and an opportunity to partake in decision-making at the local governance level. As a result, 389 women were elected among a total of 981 council seats.¹ However, women's presence in the council does not guarantee possession of influence. Women, particularly those with other intersecting identities of vulnerabilities such as persons with disabilities, have faced longstanding systemic, social, and cultural barriers that have limited their participation in the political arena. Stemming from an understanding that gender is a construct that is rooted in societal relations and power differentials, this assessment commissioned by the Local Government Authority (LGA) and UNDP Maldives seeks to understand the impact of the 33% quota on the Maldivian community, its effectiveness in ensuring women's meaningful participation and influence in decision making and formulate recommendations to build a conducive environment that complements the legislative change and contribute to island development.

The background sections are informed by a desk review of past assessments conducted in the Maldives and academic literature on TSM. The key documents highlighting the Maldivian context referenced in this assessment include:

- International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2014): Women's Empowerment in Political Processes in Maldives.
- Transparency Maldives (2019): Review of the Decentralization Framework in the Maldives.
- UNDP (2017): Women's Political Participation in the Maldives: Issue Brief.
- UNDP (2021): Women as Peacebuilders and Agents of Change in the Maldives.
- UNDP (2020): Promoting Women's Political Participation in Maldives: Issues and Options. (unpublished)
- UNDP (2023): Focus Group Discussions with Female Councillors: Main Findings. (unpublished)

¹ Maldives Institute of Local Governance & Local Government Authority. (2023). *Local Council Election Statistics*.

The desk review is further supplemented by findings from consultations held with stakeholders. The following stakeholders were interviewed during this process:

- Women’s Development Committees representing seven atolls/cities.
- President’s Office
- Ministry of Social and Family Development
- Ministry of Housing, Land and Urban Development
- National Disaster Management Authority
- Local Government Authority
- Women in Democracy
- Community Development Initiatives
- Hope for Women
- Maldives Association of Persons with Disabilities
- Maldives Deaf Association
- Blind and Visually Impaired Society of Maldives
- Transparency Maldives
- International Republican Institution
- United Nations Resident Coordinator’s Office (UNRCO)
- United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)
- United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

SUMMARY OF METHODOLOGY

The main participants for the assessment were women who were elected during the local council elections in 2021. A mixed-method design was used to conduct the assessment. Quantitative methodology was then used to acquire descriptive data that provided a general understanding of the perception of female councillors. Qualitative methodology, specifically an interpretive phenomenological approach was adopted to gain in-depth insights into the participants' interpretation of their experiences during their tenure as female councillors. The survey method and FGDs were used as the primary methods of data collection for this assessment. Discussions of a forum held for female councillors by LGA and UNDP were also integrated to ensure the experiences of a wider group were included. In terms of participation, a total of 199 female council members completed the survey. This constitutes 51% of the female council members currently in office. The qualitative component of this assessment includes the combined experience of 59 female council members; 39 participated in the FGDs and 20 attended the forum. The female councillors were disaggregated regionally based on the atoll they represented.

- Region 1: Northern atolls – **Ha, HDh, Sh, N, R, B**
- Region 2: Male' and nearby atolls – **Lh, K, AA, Adh, V**
- Region 3: Central atolls – **M, F, Dh, Th, L**
- Region 4: Southern Atolls – **Ga, GDh, Gn, S**

LIMITATIONS OF THE ASSESSMENT

The assessment was limited by two main constraints that influenced its design and implementation.

Firstly, while the assessment aimed to understand the broader impact of the legislative amendment to the Decentralisation Act and captured impacts or consequences to some extent, it cannot replace wider attitudinal and behavioural surveys that could provide a better picture of the community's current perception towards women in elected or leadership positions. Furthermore, such a survey would be most useful a few years into the future once the TSM has been implemented for a duration ample enough to trigger a significant normative change. Hence, in adhering to the scope of the assessment as outlined in GEAP, this first assessment question was not addressed to the fullest during the current assessment and is recommended to be assessed following the completion of at least two election cycles (10 years after the implementation of the reserved seats).

Secondly, the 11 female council members who resigned before the end of their term were considered an essential target group for this assessment. However, their experiences were not included due to a lack of response from them to participate in the assessment, even following several attempts to contact them. Thus, the assessment findings may potentially be skewed towards the experience of women who did not face circumstances that prompted them to resign from the position.

KEY FINDINGS OF THE SURVEY

- The majority of the respondents (total of 68.8%) believed that the quota was an effective measure to ensure women's meaningful participation in decision-making.
- A total of 79.4% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that the quota has had a positive impact on their island community.
- An overwhelming majority of the respondents (a total of 93.5% of respondents) across all regions agreed that they were able to contribute to finance-related decision-making.
- A large majority of respondents (total of 87%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to partake in discussions about projects with government agencies and other organisations.
- When questioned whether other council members respected their opinions and ideas, 72.3% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. However, 17.6% of the respondents also disagreed and strongly disagreed indicating existing challenges in some councils. This is particularly significant in Region 4 where 36% of the respondents believed that their opinions and ideas were not respected by other council members.
- A total of 88% of the respondents claimed that their council staff were supportive and assisted in implementing programmes. However, 24% of respondents from Region 4 and 15.1% from Region 3 disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement indicating prevailing challenges for female council members in working with the council staff.
- A total of 70.9% responded that they do not face any form of harassment from other council members. However, it is worth noting that a considerable percentage of respondents (total of 20.6%) do face harassment. A total of 36% of respondents from Region 4, 24.5% from Region 3, 18.7% from Region 2 and 14.6% from Region 1 admitted to experiencing harassment from other council members.

- A total of 72.3% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they received equal number of training opportunities as their male counterparts. However, a total of 22.1% also believed that there is gender-based discrimination of the distribution of training opportunities among the council members. This is particularly true for Region 4 where 48% believed that they do not receive equal opportunities to participate in trainings. Similarly, 21.9% and 22.7% of respondents from Regions 2 and 3 respectively, also indicated the same.
- The majority of the respondents (total of 62.8%) believed that they received respect from the community as a result of being elected as a council member. However, a considerable number of respondents across all regions, (total of 23.6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.
- The response to the statement of whether religion is used to limit women's political participation has the most balanced response overall with no significant majority. A total of 41.2% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement but at the same time, 39.7% also disagreed or strongly disagreed. However, region-disaggregated data shows a clear majority in Region 4 with 56% of the respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.
- A significant percentage of respondents (total of 89.5%) received the support of their family to be active in the political sphere. Only 4.5% of respondents indicated a lack of familial support.

KEY FINDINGS OF THE FGD

COUNCIL

- Many participants asserted that they did not observe any allocations based on gender and that they were responsible for a wide range of sectors. It is evident from the experience of nearly all the participants that the process undertaken to divide the responsibilities intended to be equal for the most part. However, internalised pre-conceptions of feminine and masculine roles in both male and female council members have guided the division of responsibilities, and the majority of the FGD participants undertook stereotypically feminine roles.
- An overwhelming majority of FGD participants in Regions 1, 2 and 3 agreed that they received the opportunity to contribute to the decisions made by the council, particularly pertaining to the annual work and budget planning. In stark contrast, the majority of the participants in Region 4 strongly believed that their opinions were not accepted by other council members. They were able to contribute to annual planning discussions but have experienced circumstances where their propositions were continuously challenged or rejected.
- The majority of the FGD participants across all regions believed that they do receive equal opportunity to participate in training programmes and workshops by their councils. However, as some participants highlighted, many female council members faced greater difficulty in joining training programmes due to family responsibilities rather than not receiving the opportunity from the councils. Nonetheless, the Forum participants echoed experiences where in some councils, the council president and vice president decided without the knowledge of the female council members.
- Nearly all of the participants from all regions agreed that the primary issue was an immense lack of training programmes available to council members from LGA or other organisations.

- Some FGD participants asserted that the male councillors still perceived female council members negatively and a considerable number of participants faced difficulties due to the lack of acceptance from the council staff. However, a vast majority of participants from Regions 1, 2 and 3 affirmed that they operated in a very positive work environment within the council and have not faced any gender-based discrimination from the council members or the staff. Participants stated that they received encouragement from the council leadership to undertake responsibilities in non-stereotypical sectors and both the members and staff valued their input on issues related to a wide variety of sectors.
- In most islands, PWDs, whether women or men remain excluded from community development. Most participants maintained that the lack of PWD-specific programmes was due to the limited number of PWDs residing on the island. Other participants contended that communication barriers played a huge role in their inability to involve PWDs to a greater extent. Some disclosed that the council did not obtain the input of PWDs as much as they should.

POLITICAL PARTIES

- Across all regions, a large majority of the FGD participants who represented political parties received immense support from their parties during campaigning. Political parties also covered campaign expenses for most of the participants.
- The Forum participants highlighted the lack of opportunities for women to be involved in party leadership. They argued that even within political parties there is a belief that women should not be in decision-making roles and the opportunity is given to men instead. Even when women were elected as council members, they did not receive due respect from party members.
- The participants also felt pressured by their parties to exercise political patronage where they were expected to provide favours to members of their party. Failure to comply resulted in retaliation against the women.

COMMUNITY

- The majority of the FGD participants, particularly from Regions 1, 2 and 3, stated that their island communities were very supportive and generally had positive attitudes towards female council members. They highlighted the role of the community, especially the women, in encouraging the participants to contest for the council.
- Participants from Region 2 also stated that they were respected by their island communities and were believed to be capable of successfully achieving results for the community.
- Nonetheless, the situation is not equally positive in all parts of the country. Participants from all the regions have faced negative experiences working with community members who still believe that women are not capable of undertaking certain responsibilities.
- The belief that women should stay at home and undertake household tasks and care responsibilities persists to varying degrees in all regions.
- Some Forum participants stated that religious arguments were used extensively in their communities to prevent women from contesting for elected positions.

FAMILY

- With the exception of only two participants, the remaining FGD participants from all regions highlighted the immense support they received from their families to successfully contest for the position.
- For many participants who received little to no financial assistance from their parties or who contested as independent candidates, their campaign expenses were largely covered by their families and friends.
- However, participants also noted that in general, negative attitudes of family members became barriers for women to participate in political positions.
- As the Forum participants highlighted, the belief that women should be the primary caretaker of the household remains deeply ingrained in Maldivian communities. As such, even when women are elected to political positions, they have to fulfil domestic responsibilities alongside the council work.
- The majority of the FGD participants across all regions faced this double burden. They admitted that they would not be able to undertake council work if not for the support from their spouses and families.
- It is also increasingly evident that all female council members do not experience the double burden equally. Those from different socio-economic backgrounds have differing access to help that either expands or limits their access to opportunities such as participating in trainings and knowledge exchange programmes.

IMPACT OF THE RESERVED SEATS

- The majority of the participants from all regions stated that the perception of the community towards women in elected positions was slowly becoming more positive. The community used to view working in local councils as a masculine occupation but with an increasing number of women undertaking council work, the image of council members as masculine figures has started to shift.
- Participants from all regions also highlighted positive changes for the women in the community. They observed that women were more open and comfortable sharing their opinions and concerns with the councils. Participants from Regions 1 and 3 noted that the quota has been a positive driving force and has encouraged women to become more active in community development activities and pursue political opportunities.
- Aside from greater opportunities for women to contribute to decision-making within the council, the council's admin staff have also found it easier to share their concerns with the council members. The increase in female council members has also promoted accountability within the councils.
- However, as a direct and unintended negative outcome of the quota, participants from Regions 3 and 4 reported that there is a widespread belief among both men and women that women can only contest for the reserved seats as these are the “female” seats. The participants also experienced pressure from party members to only contest for the reserved seats as they claimed women had been designated special seats, hence, leaving the other seats for men.
- In addition, a few participants from all the regions noted that there has not been a significant change in their community's perceptions towards women in leadership positions. The belief that women cannot undertake certain tasks or that women should remain at home to take care of children still prevails in many communities. The existence of such beliefs even within the councils has led to discrimination against female council members.



**BACKGROUND:
LOCAL
GOVERNANCE
IN MALDIVES**

There is currently no consensus on the origins of local governance in the Maldives. Some experts attribute early beginnings to the atoll chiefs and local committees appointed by the Presidents in the past. Others argue that the local governance framework as it exists today was formed following pressures from the people for greater political freedom at both local and national levels. Against a fluid political context, then-President Maumoon Abdul Gayyoom developed a Roadmap for Reform Agenda that resulted in the passing of a new Constitution in 2008. The efforts of diverse actors led to decentralisation being formally integrated as a core principle in the new Constitution, thus enabling the local governance framework to materialise.²

The Decentralisation Act (7/2010) remains the key legal machinery supporting the local governance framework. Chapter 8 of the Constitution does cover several fundamental aspects, for instance, provisions obligating administrative and fiscal decentralisation of governance, the election of council members, the president and vice president by secret ballot, the maximum duration of their term, broad responsibilities of the councils and powers regarding land and property.³ However, a more comprehensive framework is provided by the Decentralisation Act which includes provisions on the administrative divisions, the formation, powers and responsibilities of atoll councils, island councils and city councils, women's role in local governance, the establishment of LGA, the linkages between local councils and central government agencies, financial aspects such as income, loans, business ventures, administrative functions of the councils, planning and reporting and other relevant issues.⁴

² Transparency Maldives. (2019). *Review of the Decentralization Framework in the Maldives*. https://transparency.mv/v17/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/RDFM_ENG_FINAL-for-Website.pdf

³ Constitution of the Republic of Maldives. (2008). <https://storage.googleapis.com/presidency.gov.mv/Documents/ConstitutionOfMaldives.pdf>

⁴ Decentralization Act of Maldives. (2010).

Notably, the Act delineates island and city councils with the former existing in a dualistic governance model monitored by the atoll councils. In contrast, the city council operates alongside advisory/ward committees. For all local councils (regardless of island/city status), the powers and duties bestowed upon the councils broadly involve implementing development activities, managing and protecting natural resources and ensuring a safe environment in collaboration with local authorities. More significantly, the 7th Chapter of the Act is dedicated to strengthening women's role in local governance. Following the 8th amendment, the chapter includes provisions for the 33% reserved seats for women at local councils in addition to articles providing legal status to the Women's Development Committees (WDC) and detailing their powers and responsibilities.⁵

The Local Government Authority (LGA) was formed under the Decentralisation Act as a state body with an independent board. The organisation was created with the mandate "to monitor, regulate, oversee and develop policies for local authorities to guide and work towards sustaining an effective decentralised governance system in the country as envisioned in the Constitution of the Maldives".⁶ LGA's main functions constitute monitoring the activities of councils for quality assurance and to ensure adherence to the legislative framework, coordination of councils nationally, providing capacity building to councils and annual reporting to the Parliament on council activities.⁷ In addition, LGA works extensively to promote inclusive governance through the political and economic empowerment of women as stated in their Strategic Action Plan (2021-2023). This includes implementing in-person and virtual training sessions and policy discussion forums targeted at WDCs and female councillors.⁸

⁵ Decentralization Act of Maldives. (2010).

⁶ Local Government Authority. (2020). *Strategic Action Plan 2021-2023*, (p. 3).

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ Local Government Authority. (2021-2022). *Fanoalla Forum Report*.



**GENDER
EQUALITY
IN POLITICS:
CURRENT CONTEXT**

The principles of non-discrimination and equality underpin the Maldives' legislative framework. Stipulations in Article 17 of the Constitution and the 8th Chapter of the Gender Equality Act that specifically allow for the implementation of special measures to assist marginalised groups and ensure equal representation in public life.⁹ The Constitution specifically states:

- 17. (a) Everyone is entitled to the rights and freedoms included in this Chapter without discrimination of any kind, including race, national origin, colour, sex, age, mental or physical disability, political or other opinion, property, birth or other status, or native island.
- 17. (b) Special assistance or protection to disadvantaged individuals or groups, or to groups requiring special social assistance, as provided in law shall not be deemed to be discrimination, as provided for in article (a).” (English translation)¹⁰

The Gender Equality Act (18/2016) further obligates state bodies and political parties to ensure gender parity in the political sphere.

⁹ Gender Equality Act. (2016).

¹⁰ Constitution of the Republic of Maldives. (2008).
<https://storage.googleapis.com/presidency.gov.mv/Documents/ConstitutionOfMaldives.pdf>

The legislative framework is also then in line with the country's global commitments to gender equality. Maldives ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993 which urged the member states to ensure women's rights to participate in the political arena and promoted the use of Temporary Special Measures (TSM) to achieve this outcome.¹¹ Additionally, Maldives also adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which includes commitments to strengthen women's political participation under Goal 5:

- 5.5 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life.
- 5. C Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels".¹²

Prior to the introduction of the quota for women, statistics from local council elections in 2011, 2014 and 2017 illustrate the dismal number of women being elected as councillors. In 2011, only 5.2% of the elected councillors were women; in 2014, the percentage rose slightly to 6.5%. In 2017, only 6.1% of the elected were women. However, with the implementation of the quota during the most recent elections in 2021, the number of women elected to office increased significantly. Presently, 39.7% of councillors are women, i.e., from a total of 981 councillors, 389 are women.¹³ The distribution of female and male council members across the atolls is illustrated in the diagram below.

¹¹ OHCHR. (2023). *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, New York, 18 December 1979.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>

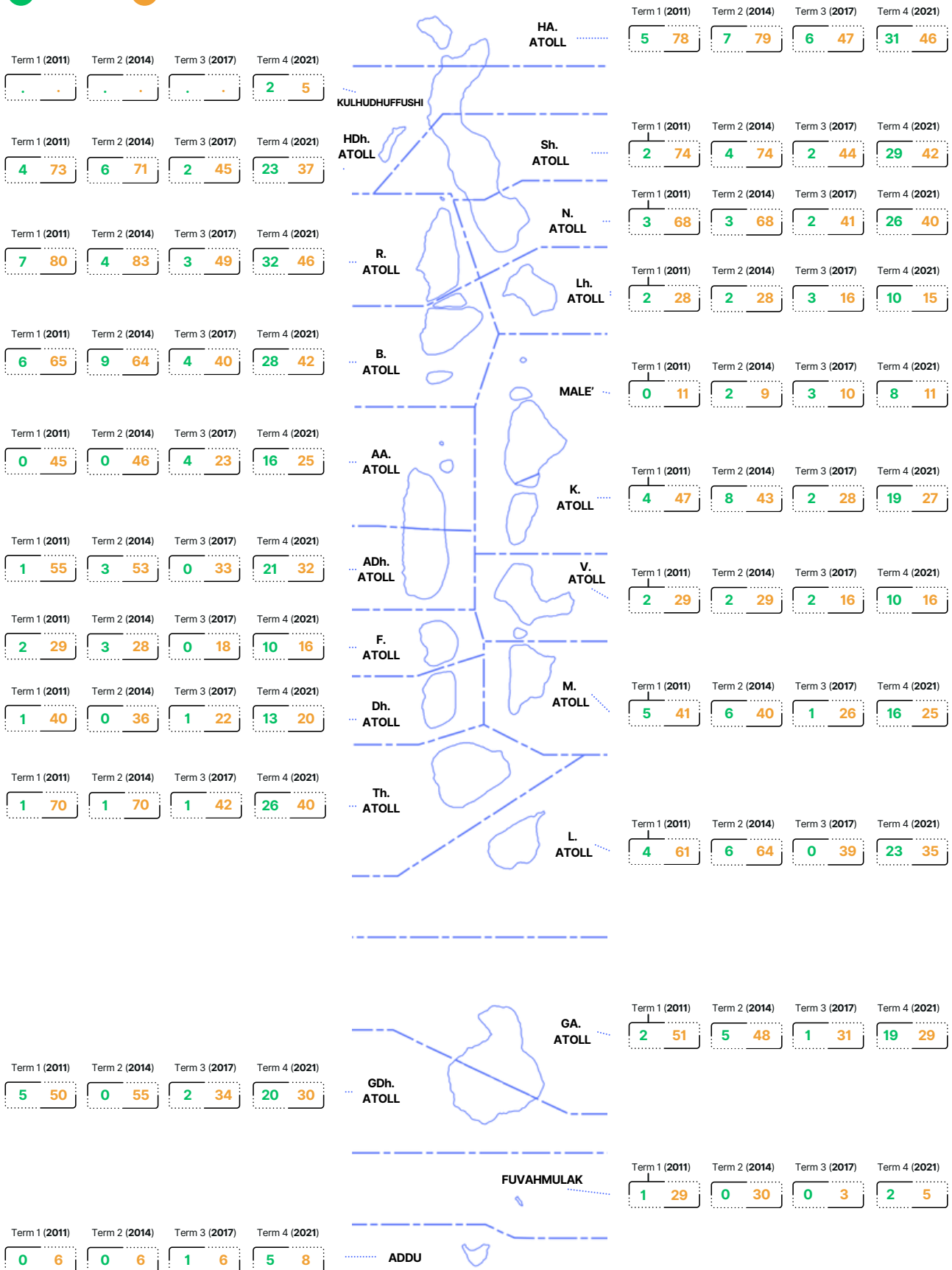
¹² UN. (2023). *The 17 Goals*.

<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

¹³ Maldives Institute of Local Governance & Local Government Authority. (2023). *Local Council Election Statistics*.

LOCAL COUNCIL ELECTION STATISTICS

Female Male



In contrast, women remain underrepresented in atoll councils and other positions of authority within local governance structures such as island council president/vice president or city council mayor/deputy mayor. During the election in 2021, 26 women were elected as vice presidents but none were elected as presidents of island councils, mayors or deputy mayors of city councils or presidents of atoll councils.¹⁴ Since the atoll council is comprised of the elected presidents of island councils and where relevant, the mayors of city councils, there was no female representation in atoll councils during the beginning of this term.¹⁵ This demonstrates a decline as there have always been some women in these positions during the past election cycles, albeit a negligible number. However, a woman was elected as the president of Faafu Atoll Council during a by-election held in 2024 making her the only woman at the atoll council level.¹⁶

Additionally, there is no existing data that shows the representation of women with other intersecting vulnerabilities or other marginalised groups, such as persons with disabilities (PWD), in the local governance structures. Nearly half of the stakeholders consulted for this assessment, maintain that the disability community is absent in local councils whether as members or staff. Some noted observing the involvement of PWDs as participants in town hall meetings, trainings, awareness sessions or community events held by the councils but at a minimal number. Only two stakeholders identified observing PWD's inclusion at the organising committee level of programmes undertaken by the council. It was also noted that in circumstances where the disability community is represented in programmes or committees, it is mostly men who participate.

Nonetheless, mechanisms have been established within the local governance system to maximize the representation of women, men, PWDs and other marginalised groups within the processes undertaken by the councils. LGA clarified that the local development planning process is designed to be inclusive. It requires the councils to consult all groups within the community during the formulation of their five-year development plans and to involve the community in the subsequent implementation and monitoring of programmes. Additionally, training workshops are provided to the councils to build their capacity to effectively undertake these tasks. LGA is also building online systems such as the 'Madhadhu' portal to enable a greater understanding of the needs of marginalised groups in the community.

¹⁴ Maldives Institute of Local Governance & Local Government Authority. (2023). *Local Council Election Statistics*.

¹⁵ UN. (2023). *The 17 Goals*.
<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

¹⁶ Local Government Authority. (2024).
<https://www.instagram.com/p/C3NEVS3ymDW/?igsh=MXZyODZiZDQxNWc3Yw==>



**BARRIERS
HINDERING THE
PARTICIPATION
OF WOMEN IN
POLITICS**

The key assessments undertaken in the Maldives (identified in the Introduction section) demonstrated the experiences of female candidates and women aspiring to pursue leadership positions, particularly the challenges they faced in participating in the political arena. Based on these assessments and the findings of the current stakeholder consultations, this analysis reframes the barriers according to a typology comprising three overall themes: State/Institutional, Community and Household/Family. However, these themes are notably interrelated and constantly interact with one another to form complex layers of inequality.

STATE/INSTITUTIONAL:

Women remain key players in the election of male candidates into positions of power by performing critical roles in their campaigns such as organising rallies and conducting door-to-door campaigns. Their overrepresentation at the grassroots level can be observed by the large number of female members registered in political parties when compared to the minimal number of female candidates contesting for elected positions from the same parties. As illustrated in Table 1 below, women constitute nearly half of the party membership in all political parties. However, even for the upcoming Parliamentary Elections scheduled for April 2024, only 10.76% of applicants are women (41 women out of a total of 381 applicants). Available data on the number of female candidates from political parties across the 93 constituencies are included in Table 2.¹⁷

¹⁷ Mohamed, M. (2024, February 16). *Percentage of female candidates is 11 percent: Elections Commission. The Edition.* <https://edition.mv/news/31769>

Political Party	Female	Male	Total
Adhaalath Party (AP)	4,276	4,474	8,750
Jumhooree Party (JP)	9,012	9,199	18,211
Maldives Development Alliance (MDA)	3,239	5,286	8,525
Maldives National Party (MNP)	3,035	4,783	7,818
Maldives Reform Movement (MRM)	1,078	1,224	2,302
Maldives Third Way Democrats (MTD)	1,149	1,263	2,412
Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP)	23,909	28,062	51,971
Peoples National Congress (PNC)	12,668	15,553	28,221
Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM)	18,400	17,601	36,001
The Democrats	1,569	2,845	4,414

Table 1: Number of women and men registered in political parties of Maldives.¹⁸

Political Party	No. of Female Candidates
Jumhooree Party (JP)	2
Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP)	4
Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and Peoples National Congress (PNC) coalition	2
The Democrats	13

Table 2: Number of female candidates from political parties contesting for the Parliamentary Election in 2024.¹⁹

¹⁸ Data provided by Elections Commission of the Maldives.

¹⁹ Mohamed, M. (2024, February 16). *Percentage of female candidates is 11 percent: Elections Commission. The Edition.* <https://edition.mv/news/31769>

Thus, many women in political parties are usually confined to only these roles and face tremendous challenges in transitioning from grassroots activists to candidates contesting for elected positions.²⁰ These women assert that political parties continue to mobilise them for street activism but have thus far made no effort to promote women's inclusion and participation in leadership positions and change the community's perception of women in politics. They posit that this is due to the stereotypical views held within the political parties. This has then led to discrimination between women and men in terms of appointing them to senior positions with women receiving fewer opportunities. This is also evident in how the reserved seats quota for local councils is perceived and operationalised within political parties. The local council seats are now divided into female and male seats and political parties actively encourage women to only apply for the "female" seats (the reserved seats).²¹ The reasoning behind this decision is to increase the chances for women to be elected by contesting for a "female" seat and to give the opportunity to a male candidate to win the open, non-reserved seat.²² The women contend that there needs to be a greater role played by political parties in preparing them to contest for elected positions.²³

Another great challenge is the issue of requiring considerable financial resources to contest for elected positions. The costs of campaigning continue to rise which is further exacerbated by the increase in vote buying.²⁴ Women generally have limited opportunities to acquire financing, particularly given that one major funding source is business owners, particularly men. However, prevailing social and gender norms (which will be discussed in detail later) interact to limit women's ability to network and access these financing options and establish political connections. Unless women have already acquired personal wealth or belong to an affluent family, they face difficulty in undertaking their campaigns and succeeding.²⁵

20 UNDP. (2017). *Women's Political Participation in the Maldives: Issue Brief*.

<https://www.undp.org/maldives/publications/womens-political-participation-maldives>

21 UNDP. (2023). *Focus Group Discussions with Female Councillors: Main Findings (unpublished)*

22 UNDP. (2020). *Promoting Women's Political Participation in Maldives: Issues and Options*. (unpublished)

23 Local Government Authority. (2022). *Fanoalla Forum Report*.

24 IFES. (2014). *Women's Empowerment in Political Processes in Maldives*.

<https://www.ifes.org/publications/womens-empowerment-political-process-maldives>

25 IFES (2014) *Women's Empowerment in Political Processes in Maldives*, UNDP (2017) *Women's Political Participation in the Maldives: Issue Brief* & UNDP (2023) *Focus Group Discussions with Female Councillors: Main Findings*. (unpublished)

This means that logically, women who get elected to positions then belong to certain socioeconomic backgrounds. Stakeholder consultations further affirm this notion. Given the necessity of adequate campaign financing and political connections to succeed in an election, women in elected positions usually belong to elite families with considerable privileges. Thus, women belonging to middle and lower socioeconomic backgrounds are underrepresented in elected positions.

Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) assert that there are even fewer opportunities available for both women and men with disabilities to participate in politics. There are some PWDs active in political parties indicating interest in pursuing political careers. However, these stakeholders argue that ensuring the participation of PWDs in elected positions is not a priority for political parties. The disability community is rarely consulted by politicians regarding community-level issues as their input is not considered valuable. The stakeholders noted that there was one man with a disability currently contesting for the Parliament. This may demonstrate some progress towards their inclusion in the political arena.

Conversely, even among the disability community, not all PWDs are equal and the opportunities they receive can be dependent on the type and severity of the disability in addition to their gender. Stakeholders note for instance, that there are additional critical barriers for the deaf community as they are not able to access political parties or even councils without an interpreter. Given the immense lack of interpreters in the Maldives and the limited opportunities available for the deaf community across the country to learn sign language, communication remains the largest hindrance to their participation in politics and the community generally.

Additionally, for some PWDs, the fulfilment of their basic rights in electoral processes such as being able to vote independently, is of greater importance than being able to contest for an elected position at this stage. As such, the type and severity of the disability play a huge role in determining the person's access to participate in electoral processes including receiving political opportunities, establishing connections, and even acquiring information, regardless of gender.²⁶

The perception of the wider community and the norms ingrained in them coalesce with the other themes to form the barriers that hinder women especially those belonging to marginalised groups. Its pervasiveness is noted in one participant's response in the FGD conducted by UNDP: "...Even those in senior positions in government agencies believe that women should stay at home to take care of their children. When we contest for elected positions, they raise questions about the number of children we have" (translated into English). The following section discusses some of these predominant norms and perceptions in the Maldivian community.

²⁶ Stakeholder consultations conducted for this assessment

COMMUNITY

Although women provide critical support to the functioning of political parties, their ability to contest for elected positions is largely restricted by the social and gender norms that dominate their community and permeate into the various institutions. A woman's role is mainly attributed to the private, domestic sphere where she primarily undertakes household chores and caretaking duties. This limits both their movement and ability to engage in community development activities, campaigning, networking and participating in training, in comparison to men.²⁷ This prevailing belief also promotes the notion that women do not have the ability to lead in positions of authority. The female participants of the FGD note that the reserved seats have made it easier for them to successfully contest for the local council, however, they still face scepticism from the community on their capabilities and capacity to contribute.²⁸

The WDCs consulted during this assessment specifically highlighted the strong adherence to restrictive beliefs by women themselves. This has resulted in female candidates facing harassment or obstructions from other women in the community, including women already in leadership positions. Women then face the fear of defamation and negative coverage in the media along with an added risk of being extensively criticized and bullied on social media.²⁹ This is compounded by an increasingly conservative misinterpretations of religious teachings which promulgates the belief that women should not be in positions of power.³⁰ However, women do receive support and encouragement from the community and those who succeed in becoming elected, do so with the help of their families.³¹

²⁷ IFES (2014) *Women's Empowerment in Political Processes in Maldives* & UNDP (2023) *Focus Group Discussions with Female Councillors: Main Findings*. (unpublished)

²⁸ UNDP. (2023). *Focus Group Discussion with Female Councillors: Main Findings*. (unpublished)

²⁹ UNDP. (2021). *Women as Peacebuilders and Agents of Change in the Maldives*. <https://www.undp.org/maldives/publications/women-peacebuilders-and-agents-change-maldives>

³⁰ UNDP (2017) *Women's Political Participation in the Maldives: Issue Brief* & UNDP (2023) *Focus Group Discussion with Female Councillors: Main Findings*. (unpublished)

³¹ UNDP. (2023). *Focus Group Discussion with Female Councillors: Main Findings*. (unpublished)

Women with disabilities face the combined effect of the above-mentioned discrimination due to their identities as both a woman and a PWD. The limited awareness in the community regarding the lives of PWDs has resulted in both women and men with disabilities being portrayed as people without any capabilities. The negative perception of PWDs has also led to harassment and they are dissuaded from participating in politics for fear of their safety being compromised. The belief that they cannot adequately contribute at decision-making levels and the harassment they face are compounded due to their intersecting identities.³²

The belief systems ingrained in the community have also led to negative views about the reserved seats. Prior to the local council election, there was a movement spearheaded largely by men in local councils and political parties, campaigning against the implementation of reserved seats for women. The 33% quota was perceived as an injustice to the men and that the position was being 'served on a silver platter' for the women instead of on a merit basis. However, in reference to their more recent engagements with the community, the stakeholders noted that the perception towards the reserved seats may be slowly changing and they are optimistic of a more positive outcome during the next election cycle.³³

³² Stakeholder consultations conducted for this assessment.

³³ Stakeholder consultations conducted for this assessment.

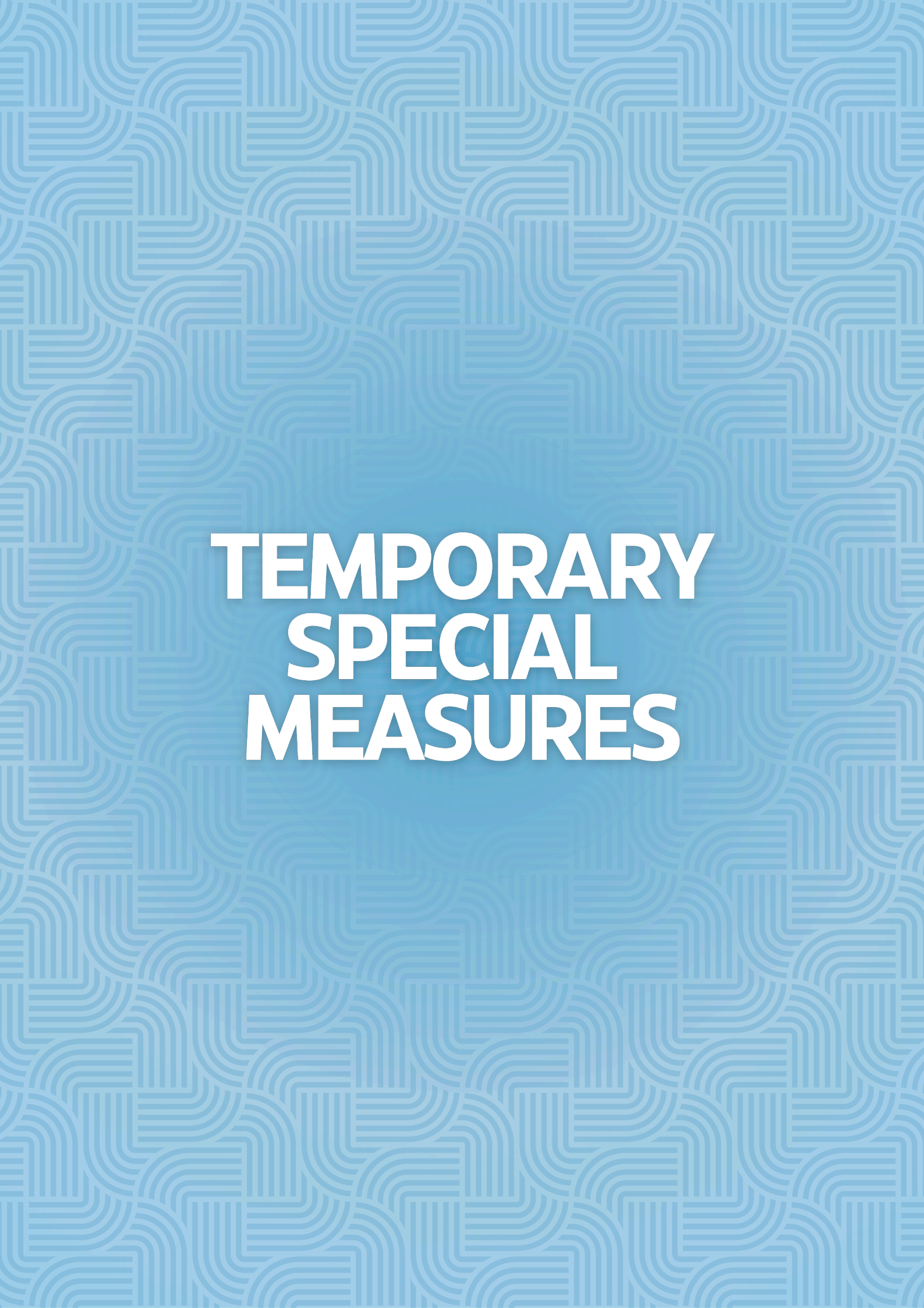
HOUSEHOLD/FAMILY

Family support has been reported as a key determinant of female candidates' success in being elected given that family members can provide assistance in terms of social and cultural support such as managing household and care responsibilities, as well as providing monetary aid.³⁴ Building a support system of family and friends has encouraged women to break gender stereotypes and pursue their political ambitions. In contrast, the lack of a supportive family has been reported as a significant hindrance to women entering politics. Participants of the FGD reported spouses and family members who persist in the belief that women should not partake in the political domain. As women are still largely expected to undertake domestic responsibilities despite election to office or employment, limited support from the family impedes their ability to be active in the political arena. Notably, the perceptions of the community and family also impact the women's belief in their own abilities. Many women lacked the confidence to pursue a political career and were particularly doubtful of their public speaking skills. Some women also reported that the challenges they face when contesting for a position negatively impacted their mental well-being.³⁵

It is worth noting that the COVID-19 pandemic also posed unique challenges to both female and male candidates during the most recent Local Council Election held in 2021. The election was originally scheduled for 2020, however, due to the implementation of a lockdown and movement restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19, the election was postponed to 2021. This resulted in a total of 169 candidates (64 women and 105 men) withdrawing their nominations before the election. Further studies are needed to examine the circumstances that led to this decision and the impact of the pandemic.

34 IFES. (2014). *Women's Empowerment in Political Processes in Maldives*.
<https://www.ifes.org/publications/womens-empowerment-political-process-maldives>

35 UNDP. (2023). *Focus Group Discussion with Female Councillors: Main Findings*. (unpublished)



TEMPORARY SPECIAL MEASURES

The implementation of the temporary special measures (TSM) began with the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies in 1985 that urged member states to actively implement strategies to ensure women's right to be elected to political positions. The term, "Temporary Special Measures" derived from Article 4 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), was then made more significant by its inclusion in the General Recommendations of the UN's CEDAW Committee in 1988.³⁶ TSM in this context was adopted as "positive action, preferential treatment, or quota systems to advance women's integration into education, the economy, politics, and employment".³⁷

With an increasing number of countries implementing electoral quotas in the years that followed, three key methods emerged: reserved seats, party quotas and legislative quotas.³⁸ The reserved seats method involves amendments to the constitutions and/or electoral laws to allocate specific seats for women. In comparison, party quotas place the responsibility on political parties to specify and commit to a minimum proportion of women in their candidate lists. This is then ingrained in their internal party policies. Thus far, party quotas have been the most common method used. Legislative quotas are relatively the most recent method and constitute amendments to electoral laws and/or constitutions obligating political parties to ensure a minimum percentage of female candidacy.³⁹ However, quotas for women have not been equally successful in all countries. The purpose of implementing a quota, the method adopted, the framing of the measures and the political context in which the quota is embedded, contribute to either producing a transformative change for women's political participation or creating even more obstacles for women.⁴⁰

36 Krook, M. L. (2013). *Gender and Elections: Temporary Special Measures Beyond Quotas*. <https://www.ssrc.org/publications/gender-and-elections-temporary-special-measures-beyond-quotas/>

37 UN. (1988). *CEDAW: General Recommendation No. 5*. <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/recomm.htm>

38 Krook, M. L. (2013). *Gender and Elections: Temporary Special Measures Beyond Quotas*. <https://www.ssrc.org/publications/gender-and-elections-temporary-special-measures-beyond-quotas/>

39 Krook, M. L. (2013). *Gender and Elections: Temporary Special Measures Beyond Quotas*. <https://www.ssrc.org/publications/gender-and-elections-temporary-special-measures-beyond-quotas/>

40 Krook, M. L. (2013). *Gender and Elections: Temporary Special Measures Beyond Quotas*. <https://www.ssrc.org/publications/gender-and-elections-temporary-special-measures-beyond-quotas/>

RESERVED SEATS FOR WOMEN IN THE MALDIVES

The 8th amendment brought to the Decentralisation Act in 2019 reserved 33% of seats in local councils for women. Since then, Maldives has only experienced the implementation of this legislative change for one election cycle. The system's infancy in Maldives was illustrated in the stakeholders' recent engagement with local councils as they observed the emergence of considerable challenges as the country grappled with the implementation of a new significant policy change.

The majority of the stakeholders contended that the representation of women so far remains symbolic. Women's increased representation has not translated to substantial influence and power for most female councillors. Although elected as council members, women do not receive the same opportunities to partake in decision-making as their male counterparts. Stakeholders noted situations where female councillors were absent in meetings where important political matters were being discussed or instances where their opinions were not being considered, especially if they were elected for the reserved seats. Given that the council presidents/vice presidents and mayors/deputy mayors are mostly men, there are also situations where women have felt hesitant to voice out their concerns or advocate to prioritise certain issues for fear of incurring further backlash and hostility from the other council members. Some WDCs also asserted that the women's voices were constrained even in national forums and conferences held by government agencies for local councils. They contended that the male councillors received more opportunities to share their opinions and ideas on such public platforms compared to female councillors or representatives of WDCs. The patriarchal nature of the society means that the councils persist as male-dominated structures where the men still hold more power.

On the contrary, some stakeholders argued that the women's limited participation was also related to their skills and experience. They highlighted the efforts of numerous female councillors, and their ability to actively partake in the council's decision-making processes by asserting their concerns and opinions. They contended that some women lack the experience of being in such a position or do not view themselves as leaders thus affecting their ability and motivation to be active in the councils' work. Further training was recommended to ensure that all female councillors possess adequate skills and confidence to meaningfully participate in the council.

Nonetheless, the majority of the stakeholders also stated that the female councillors were usually assigned stereotypically feminine roles in the council. Tasks such as organising events to commemorate international/national days, leading street clean-up programmes, conducting workshops for the community, and monitoring the WDCs were usually delegated to the female councillors. They were also allocated responsibilities related to sectors that were considered typically associated with women such as education. This is fuelled by the belief that women only have expertise in certain areas and that men are more suitable to carry out responsibilities related to political or economic sectors such as road development, harbour construction, etc.⁴¹

The gender roles prevalent within the community also mean that most female councillors undertake household and care duties aside from their work in the council. Some stakeholders noted deliberate attempts by male councillors to prove women's lack of capacity to contribute by assigning tasks that would be challenging for the female councillors to carry out, especially due to their family responsibilities. The burden of juggling council and home responsibilities and a lack of a family-friendly work environment in the councils further limit their ability to participate effectively. There is an expectation among stakeholders that the introduction of the TSM and the subsequent increase of women in elected positions would contribute to greater awareness regarding gender issues and a potential change in gender norms similar to other global contexts. However, the perseverance of gender norms in the Maldivian context illustrates the significance of the historical context of a country in generating normative change and being cautious in drawing global comparisons. Yet, it is acknowledged that the Maldives has only experienced the TSM's implementation for a short period and we are yet to see if the country will follow a similar pathway to gender equality.

⁴¹ Stakeholder consultations conducted for this assessment.

Despite the unfavourable environment hindering female councillors' meaningful participation, the stakeholders also maintained that the councils functioned differently on every island and highlighted the positive outcomes of the reserved seats observed in many others. Female councillors have also undertaken non-stereotypical work and proved their ability to perform tasks previously thought to be men's domain. Stakeholders noted the growing priority towards implementing initiatives that focused on the community's wellbeing. This has led to a marked improvement in the relationship between the councils and the public with fewer issues being raised about the councils' conduct. Some WDCs also highlighted the immense support they received from both female and male councillors and the increasing number of collaborative work undertaken with the councils to promote women's empowerment. Although the linkage between WDCs and councils has strengthened in some islands, there is still room for improvement in terms of coordination and collaboration in many others. Nonetheless, there have also been drastic changes in terms of the council's rapport with other stakeholders. Female councillors have demonstrated exceptional capabilities in liaising with stakeholders and mobilising diverse groups from the community for initiatives such as training and awareness sessions. As a result, a growing number of women from the community are now increasingly involved in the development of their island.

However, it must be noted that the OPDs unanimously agreed that they did not notice any positive changes for the disability community. The councils are still unable to efficiently fulfil their mandate of connecting with the PWDs in their community and being informed about the needs and challenges of PWDs. Furthermore, the programmes held by the councils remain largely inaccessible to PWDs and there is a lack of initiative from the councils to collaborate with OPDs to implement inclusive programmes. Other stakeholders also highlighted the lack of PWD inclusion in the councils' advisory committees and the limited focus on the disability community in the island/city/atoll development plans. The need for greater involvement of PWDs in the councils or at least a greater awareness of the needs of the disability community among the councillors (whether female or male) was strongly emphasised.

Nevertheless, even within the limited time frame following the implementation of the reserved seats, the councils' functioning has strengthened where the efforts of female and male councillors were highly collaborative. In some islands, male councillors have expressed greater acceptance and open-mindedness to working with women, consequently producing more positive results in those councils.⁴²

The experience of the stakeholders has thus far established the need to conduct additional programming alongside legislative measures to create an enabling environment for women's participation. It is worth mentioning that the stakeholders' experience indicates that the challenges experienced by Maldives are different in some respects when compared to global contexts thus underscoring the relevance of the specific political, historical, and cultural context of each country in designing policy and programming despite the overarching issue being related to gender dynamics and power. While global contexts can certainly be used to inspire solutions, this finding further emphasises the importance of producing local solutions that address the specific challenges in the Maldives. As such, in-depth discussions with female councillors, focusing on the areas identified by the stakeholder consultations and past assessments, are needed to identify possible avenues for strengthening women's participation in local governance.

⁴² Stakeholder consultations conducted for this assessment.

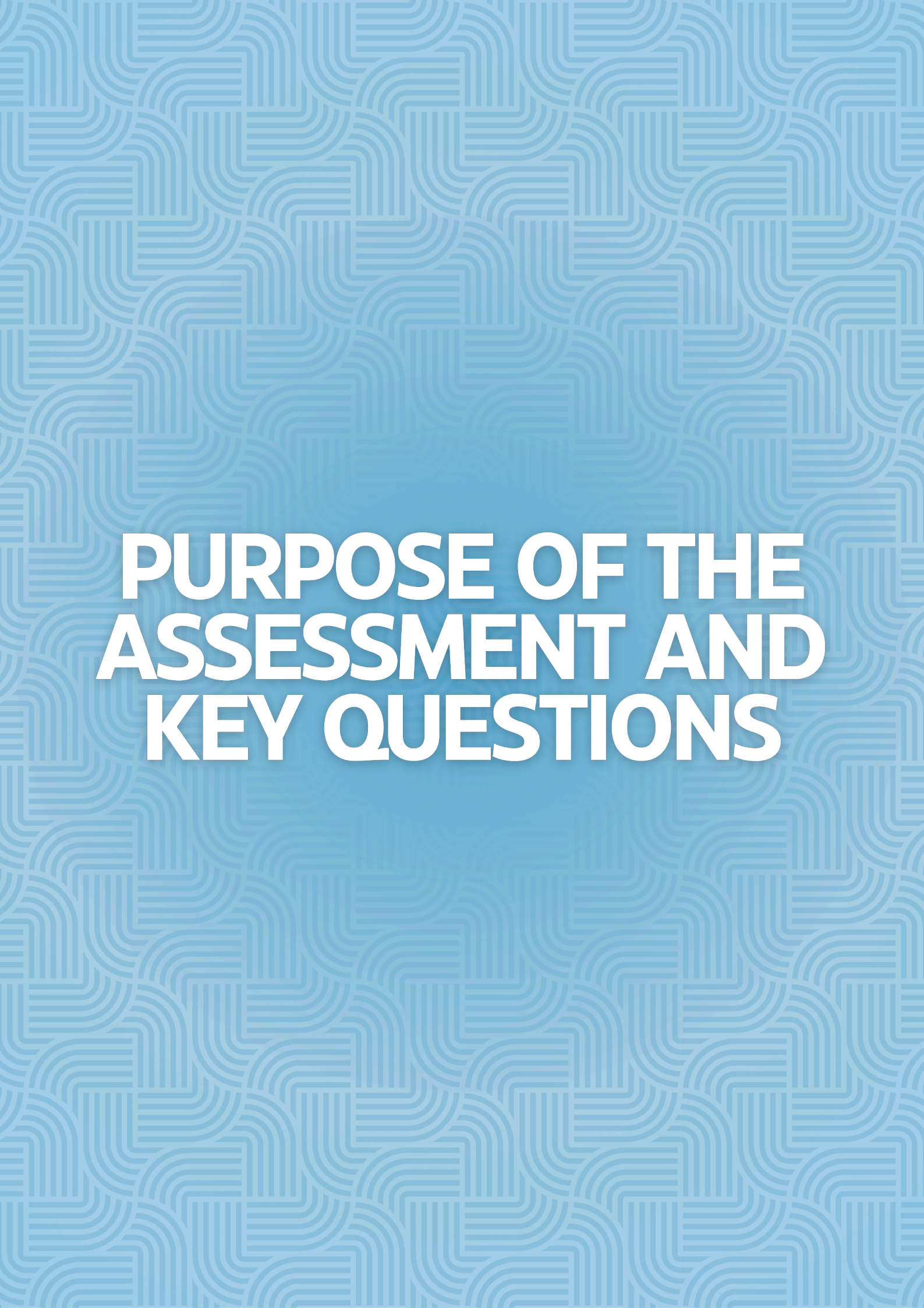


EXISTING PROGRAMMES BY STAKEHOLDERS

Given the need to formulate policies and programming that address the emerging issues hindering women’s meaningful participation in local governance, the assessment also explored the existing programmes and mechanisms established by stakeholders. Within the past two years, following the most recent local council election, the majority of the stakeholders did not have any programmes that specifically targeted female councillors, although the female councillors were invited to participate in other initiatives. For instance, trainings were conducted for all councillors during the induction period to familiarise them with their new roles and build their capacity to undertake the council’s mandate. Additional sessions on gender sensitisation, participatory budgeting, anti-corruption, good governance, whistleblowing, business integrity, right to information, disaster risk reduction and response and knowledge exchange forums were also conducted by the stakeholders. Only two stakeholders mentioned implementing programmes specifically for female councillors. One conducted training for female councillors – at a limited geographical scope – immediately following the implementation of the quota. Another stated that they were working in partnership with LGA to produce courses for female councillors and WDCs to be published in LGA’s online learning portal, ‘Kiyeveni’. More recently, LGA has also renewed their focus on providing further support to female councillors in addition to WDCs and has partnered with other stakeholders to organise leadership training and forums.

Additionally, LGA has established formal mechanisms for councillors to lodge complaints. Any issues faced can be reported via hotline numbers, using email, through focal points assigned to specific atolls, and via online platforms such as WhatsApp and Microsoft 365. Resources on reporting mechanisms have also been communicated with all the councils. However, as a long-term strategy, LGA encourages and supports local councils to develop their own policies and procedures to address issues within their councils. Although not formalised, other stakeholders also employed strategies to ensure female councillors were engaged in initiatives held in collaboration with the councils. Stakeholders noted using strategies such as requesting for the full council to be present at meetings and ensuring female councillors were involved in the organising of the initiative or were the main focal point leading the initiative from the council. In circumstances where the female councillor cannot be involved, for example, the council president is required to be the council representative in a committee (and all council presidents are men during this election cycle), the WDC is involved to ensure the representation of women in that committee. However, one stakeholder also highlighted facing the opposite issue where the male councillors were not involved if the initiative was related to a social issue. The stakeholder then undertook additional measures to ensure the male councillors were present in meetings and were engaged in organising the initiative.

There was an assumption among the majority of the stakeholders that the female councillors were now able to meaningfully participate at the decision-making level with the implementation of the reserved seats. Thus, their programmatic focus was shifted to other organs of the local governance system such as the WDCs, who were struggling to function within the confines set by the policies. However, recent forums held with female councillors have also highlighted the need for change in multiple domains to create a conducive environment where women's symbolic representation transforms into active participation in local councils. This assessment would then provide a basis for formulating future policy and programmatic interventions in this regard.



PURPOSE OF THE ASSESSMENT AND KEY QUESTIONS

The National Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) of Maldives includes an action under its Goal 1: Leadership and Governance, that specifies the implementation of an assessment to understand the impact of the reserved seats for women in local councils. Based on past studies and the findings of the stakeholder consultations, the current assessment focused on addressing the following questions:

- What was the intended and unintended impact of the reserved seats on the Maldivian community?
- How effective were the reserved seats in ensuring women's meaningful participation and influence in local governance?
- What strategies can be mobilised to strengthen women's role and influence in decision-making at the local level?



METHODOLOGY

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Kabeer's Social Relations Approach is central to the design and analysis of this assessment. This gender analysis framework builds on the understanding that power differentials underlie gender relations. Ingrained in the approach is the concept of intersectionality; the understanding that a person's different identities, such as nationality, socioeconomic status, disability, ethnicity, etc., intersect with their gender identity to produce multi-faceted inequalities. Also rooted in this approach is the undertaking of an institutional analysis where four critical institutional realms; the community, family, state, and the market are examined to understand gender relations and power.⁴³ Hence, both an institutional and intersectional lens will be employed for the purposes of this assessment.

APPROACH

A large part of the assessment focused on understanding the lived experiences of female councillors as they navigated a male-dominated governance structure. However, given the diverse socio-cultural factors of the many island communities, the assessment also aimed to capture the varying experiences of women across the nation. Considering the data needed to address the abovementioned questions, a mixed-method design was used to conduct the assessment. Quantitative methodology was used to acquire descriptive data that provided a general understanding of the perception of female councillors. Qualitative methodology, specifically an interpretive phenomenological approach was adopted to gain in-depth insights into the participants' interpretation of their experiences during their tenure as female councillors. Their experiences, complemented by information from other stakeholders, helped to provide an understanding of other complex factors such as interactions between different institutional realms and intersecting identities that give rise to prevailing inequalities, thus aligning with the conceptual underpinnings of this assessment.

⁴³ Kabeer, N. (1994). *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS AND TIMELINE

The survey method and FGDs were used as the primary methods of data collection for this assessment. For the purposes of obtaining data regarding the female councillors' general perceptions, the survey method was adopted and implemented via Microsoft Forms. The online survey was open for responses from 4th – 25th January 2024. The survey questions are included in Annexe 2. FGDs were used to gather in-depth data from the participants. The FGDs were used to discuss the experiences of the female councillors the the assessment questions and used a combination of Outcome-Harvesting methodology and semi-structured questions. The questions were designed to gain an understanding of the gender and power dynamics within the local governance framework from an institutional lens. A forum targeting female councillors and WDCs was also held from 12th – 13th December 2023 by LGA and UNDP. As the discussions at the forum also focused on the same subject area, the experiences of the female council members in attendance were also added to the assessment to ensure that the voice of a wider group was included. The detailed method for the FGD and the questions are included in Annexe 3.

PARTICIPANTS AND SAMPLING

The main participants for the assessment were women who were elected during the local council elections in 2021, regardless of whether they were elected for a reserved seat and if they are currently in office or have resigned. Purposive sampling was then employed to determine participants for the assessment as it requires people possessing relevant experience in the local governance framework to address the abovementioned assessment questions.

To engage participants for the assessment, LGA sent a bulk SMS to all the female council members with a link to the Microsoft Form to register for the FGDs. Participants were then selected on a first come first serve basis ensuring that no more than one participant from an island was included and that the participant did not join the Women in Local Governance Forum. Additionally, to reduce potential registration bias and maximize the number of participants in the assessment, female councillors from specific councils were invited to join additional FGD sessions. The councils were selected systematically based on LGA's Local Council Performance Index Ranking of 2022, to ensure that the participants represented councils with varied rankings and thus diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, no more than six participants were interviewed at a time during the FGDs to ensure maximum participation. The female councillors were disaggregated regionally based on the atoll they represented.

- Region 1: Northern atolls – **Ha, HDh, Sh, N, R, B**
- Region 2: Male' and nearby atolls – **Lh, K, AA, Adh, V**
- Region 3: Central atolls – **M, F, Dh, Th, L**
- Region 4: Southern Atolls – **Ga, GDh, Gn, S**

A detailed list of participants and stakeholders is included in Annexe 1.



FINDINGS OF THE SURVEY

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

A total of 200 female council members completed the survey of which 199 responses were valid. This constitutes 51% of the female council members currently in office. The age of the respondents ranged from 23-53 years with the highest number of respondents belonging to the 36-45 years age group. A detailed breakdown of the age groups is provided in the table below.

Age Group	No. of Respondents	Percentage %
18 - 25	10	5.0%
26 - 35	76	38.2%
36 - 45	93	46.7%
46 - 55	20	10.1%
56 - 65	0	0.0%
Above 65	0	0.0%
Total	199	100%

Table 3: Age of survey respondents

Overall, the pre-determined four main regions were represented in the survey. The majority of the survey respondents (44.7%) belonged to Region 1: Ha, Hdh, Sh, N, R and B which is expected as the highest number of female council members belong to this region. The number of respondents and percentage of representation from each region is highlighted in the table below.

Region	No. of Respondents	Percentage % of Respondents	No. of Female Councilors in Office	Percentage % Represented in Survey
Region 1: Ha, Hdh, Sh, N, R and B	89	44.7%	171	52.0%
Region 2: Lh, K, AA, Adh and V	32	16.1%	84	38.1%
Region 3: M, F, Dh, Th and L	53	26.6%	88	60.2%
Region 4: Ga, Gdh, Gn and S	25	12.6%	46	54.3%
Total	199	100%	389	N/A

Table 4: Number of survey respondents from each region

Of the 199 respondents, two identified as PWDs with both disclosing that they had a visual disability. Additionally, 177 respondents stated that they contested as candidates affiliated with a political party, whereas 22 contested as independent candidates.

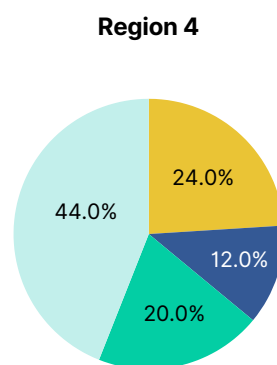
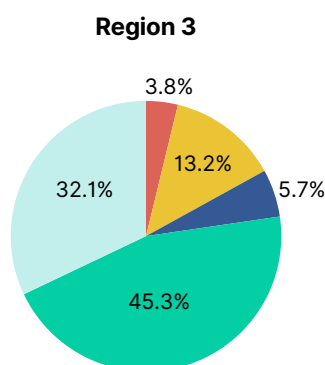
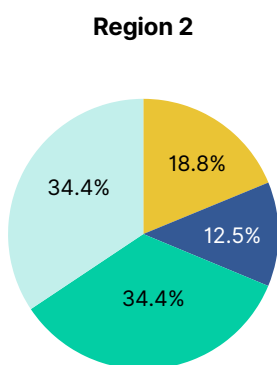
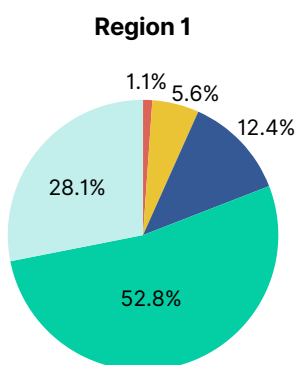
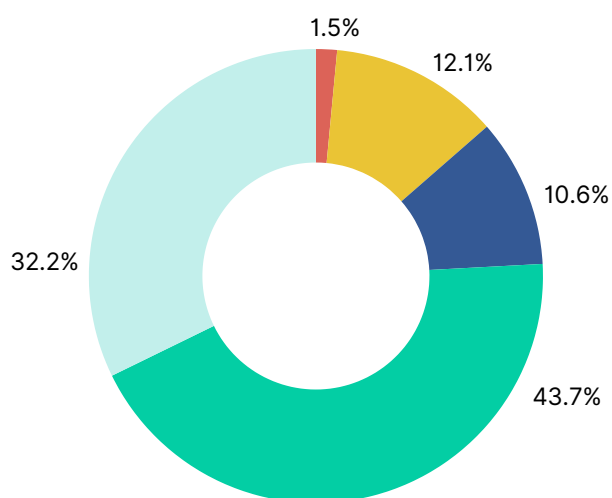
RESULTS

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RESERVED SEATS

The survey examined the respondents' perception towards the implementation of the reserved seats and women's role in the council. The respondents across all regions generally had a favourable view of this policy change with 75.9% agreeing or strongly agreeing that the quota for women in local councils enabled them to become elected as council members. However, Regions 2 and 4 constitute the majority of the respondents who disagreed with this statement.

The 33% quota for women in the local councils made it possible for me to become elected as a councillor.

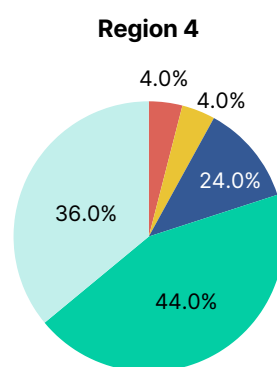
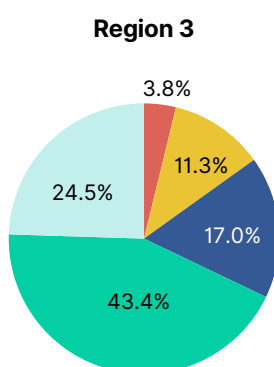
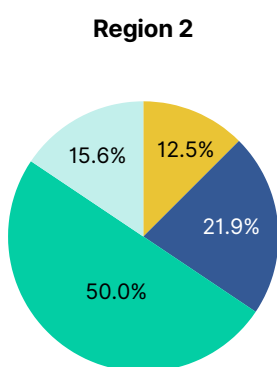
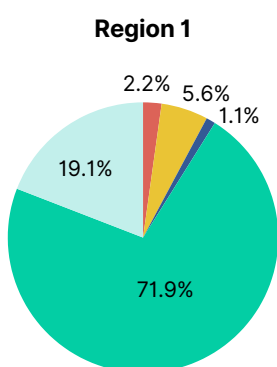
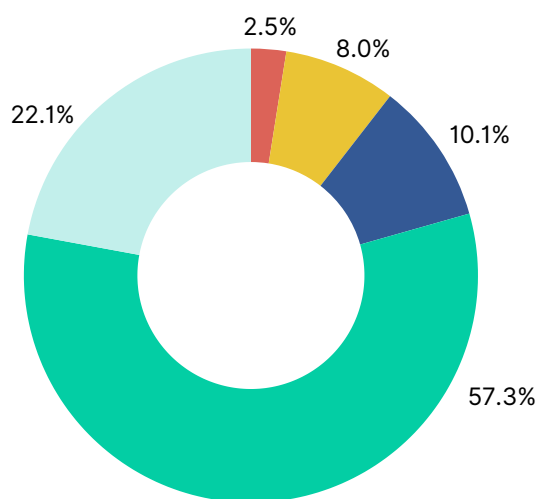
● Strongly Disagree ● Disagree ● Neutral ● Agree ● Strongly Agree



Similarly, a total of 79.4% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that the quota has had a positive impact on their island community. This is particularly significant in Regions 1 and 4 where 91% and 80% respectively, either agreed or strongly agreed to this statement compared to the 65.6% in Region 2 and 67.9% in Region 3.

The introduction of the quota for women in local councils has had a positive impact on my community.

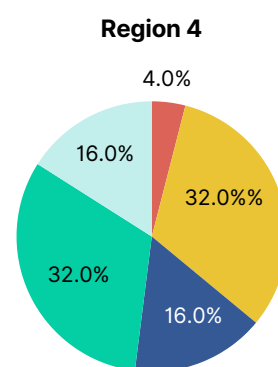
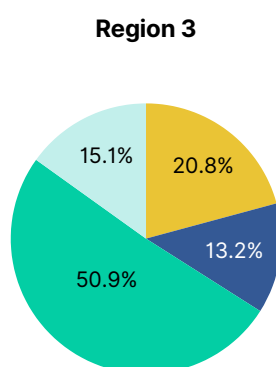
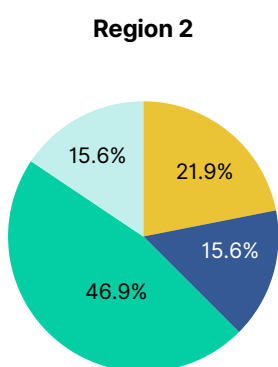
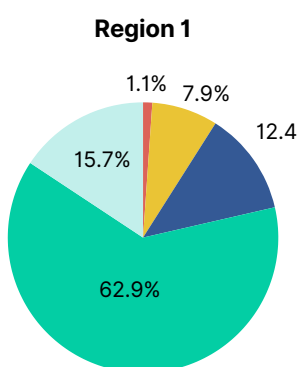
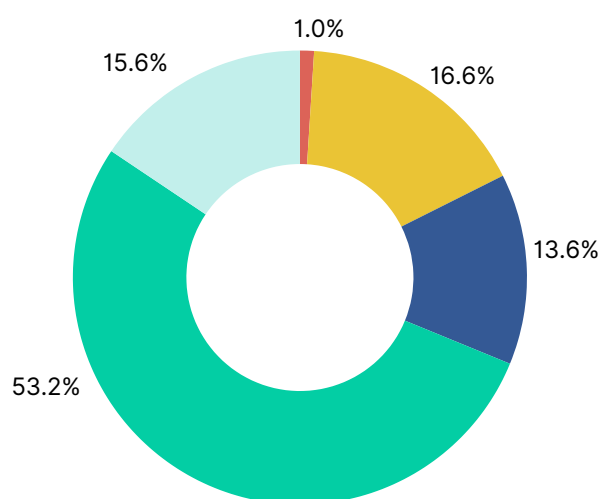
● Strongly Disagree ● Disagree ● Neutral ● Agree ● Strongly Agree



The majority of the respondents (total of 68.8%) also believed that the quota was an effective measure to ensure women’s meaningful participation in decision-making. However, 17.6% of the respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement while 13.6% remained neutral. This finding is particularly significant for Region 4 where a total of 36% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed.

The quota was effective in ensuring that women were able to meaningfully participate in decision-making.

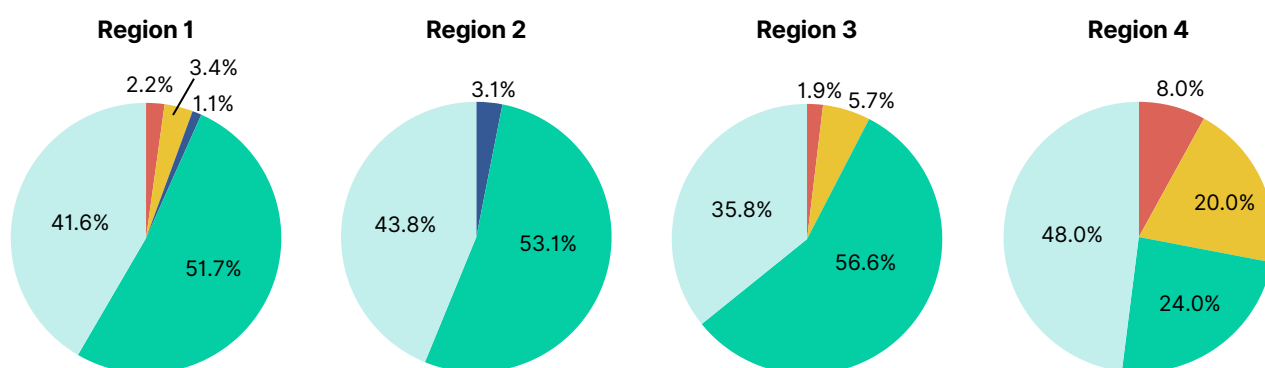
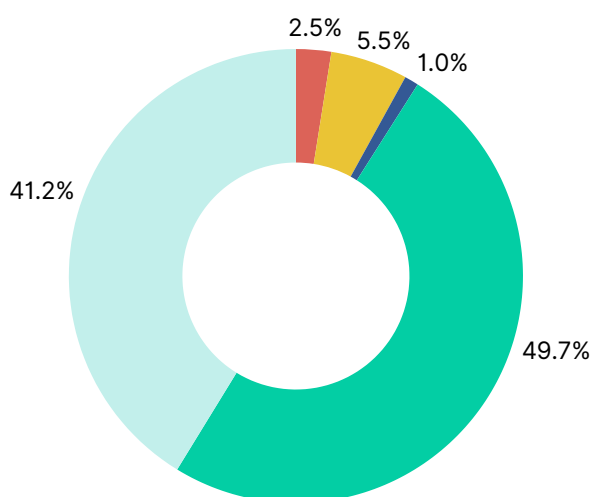
● Strongly Disagree ● Disagree ● Neutral ● Agree ● Strongly Agree



When questioned whether they believed that women could play a significant role in undertaking the work of the local councils, the majority of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. However, 8% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed and 1% remained neutral. Notably, 28% of the respondents from Region 4 disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. Given the many challenges that female councillors from Region 4 have faced (elaborated further in the FGD findings), this finding most likely alludes to these limitations as opposed to the belief that women are incapable of undertaking such a role.

I believe that women can play a significant role in undertaking the work of the local councils.

● Strongly Disagree ● Disagree ● Neutral ● Agree ● Strongly Agree

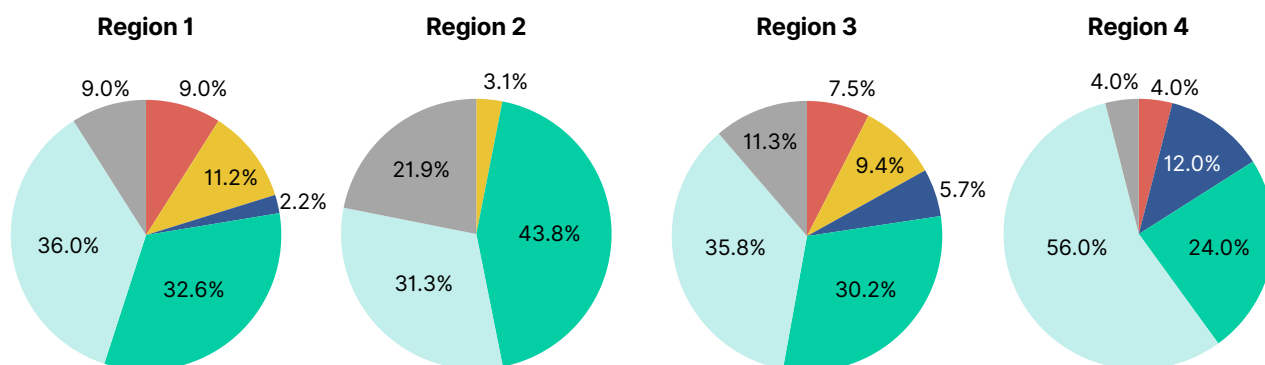
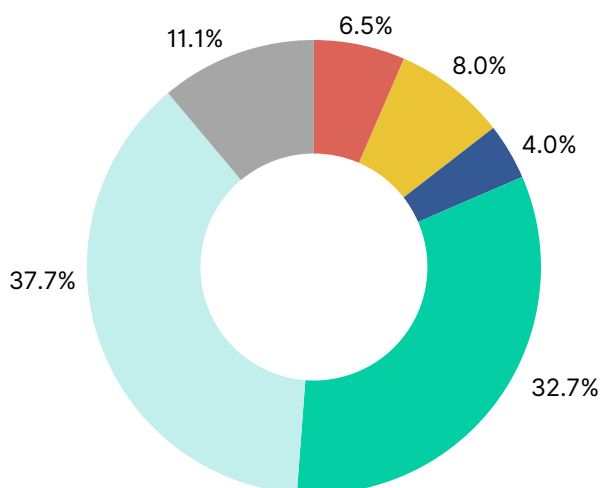


POLITICAL PARTIES

The majority of the respondents who were affiliated with a political party agreed or strongly agreed that they received ample support during campaigning. Respondents from Region 4 in particular agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (80% in total). However, a total of 14.5% of respondents received limited support, if at all, from their political parties. This is especially true for 20.2% of respondents from Region 1.

I received ample support from my political party when I was campaigning for the local council.

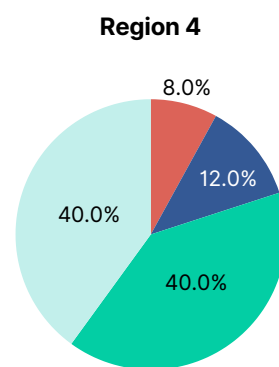
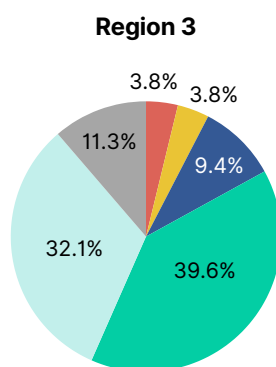
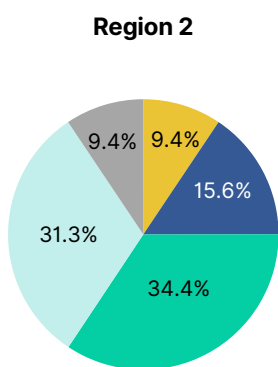
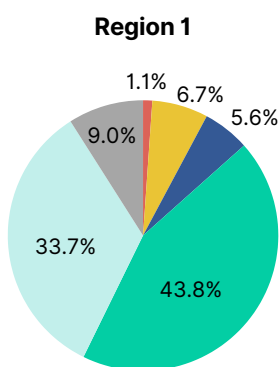
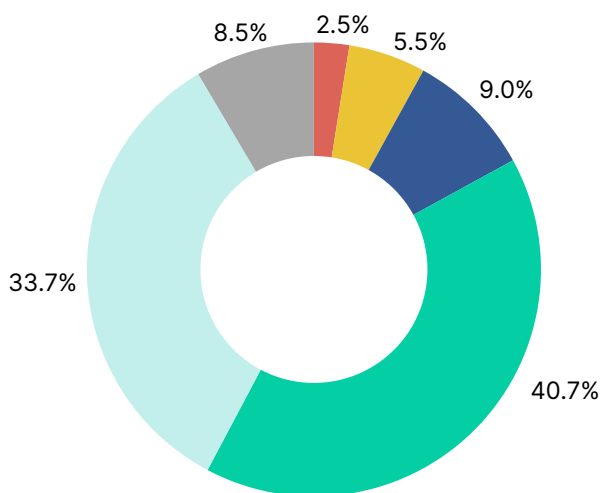
● Strongly Disagree
 ● Disagree
 ● Neutral
 ● Agree
 ● Strongly Agree
 ● Not affiliated with a political party



Nevertheless, a large number of female council members agreed that they required more support from their political parties than they currently receive, even after becoming elected. Intriguingly, only 8.5% identified as being affiliated with a political party for this statement, whereas 11.1% identified as having represented a political party during campaigning in the previous question. This could indicate that some participants may have resigned from their political parties sometime following their election to the post.

I needed more support from my political party even after I became elected.

● Strongly Disagree ● Disagree ● Neutral ● Agree ● Strongly Agree ● Not affiliated with a political party

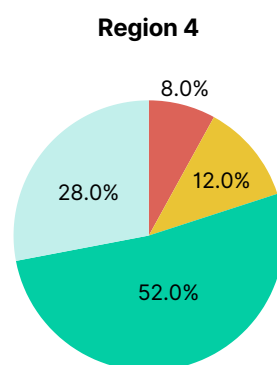
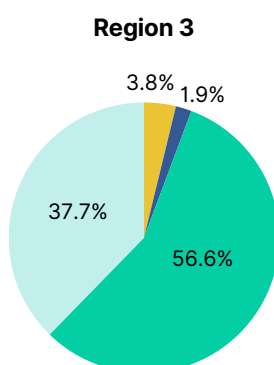
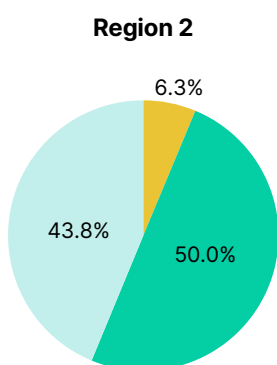
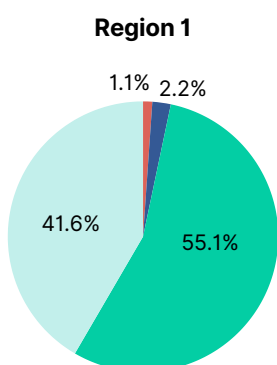
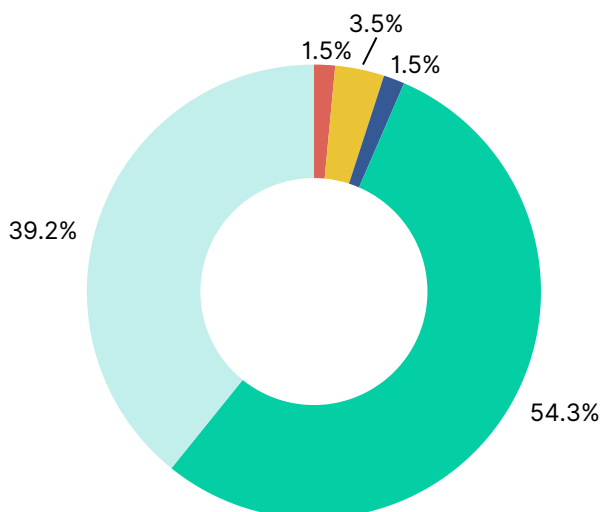


LOCAL COUNCILS

Nearly half of the questions in the survey aim to gauge the respondents' experience working in the councils. Among these, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (a total of 93.5% of respondents) across all regions agreed that they were able to contribute to finance-related decision-making. However, 20% of the respondents from Region 4 either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

I am able to contribute to the financial decisions made during council meetings.

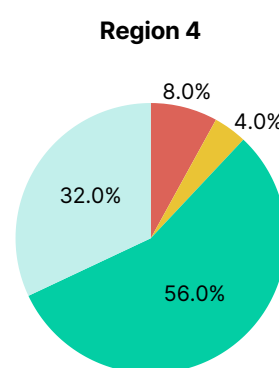
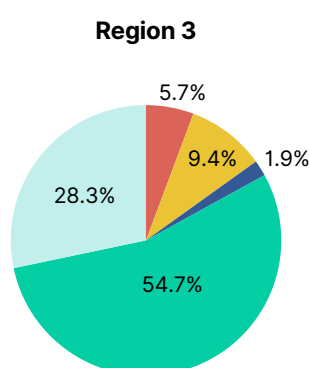
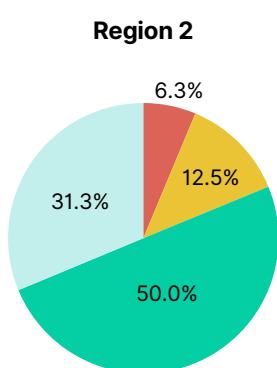
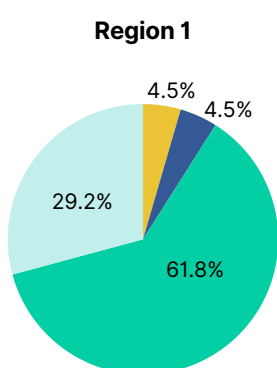
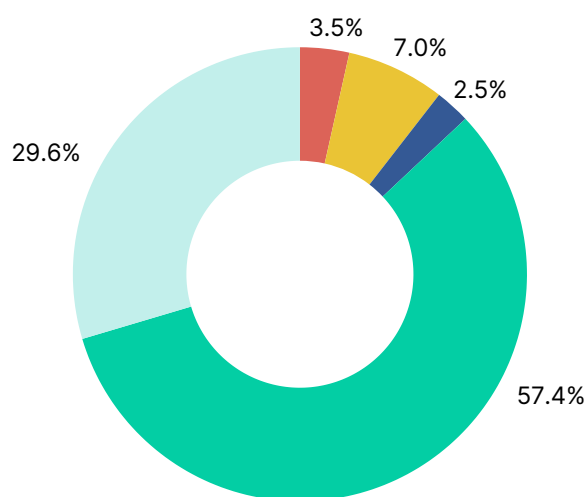
● Strongly Disagree
 ● Disagree
 ● Neutral
 ● Agree
 ● Strongly Agree



Furthermore, a large majority of respondents (total of 87%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to partake in discussions about projects with government agencies and other organisations. Respondents from Region 1 especially, have had a positive experience in this regard with 91% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement. However, 18.8% of respondents from Region 2 disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

I am able to partake in discussions about projects with other Ministries and organisations.

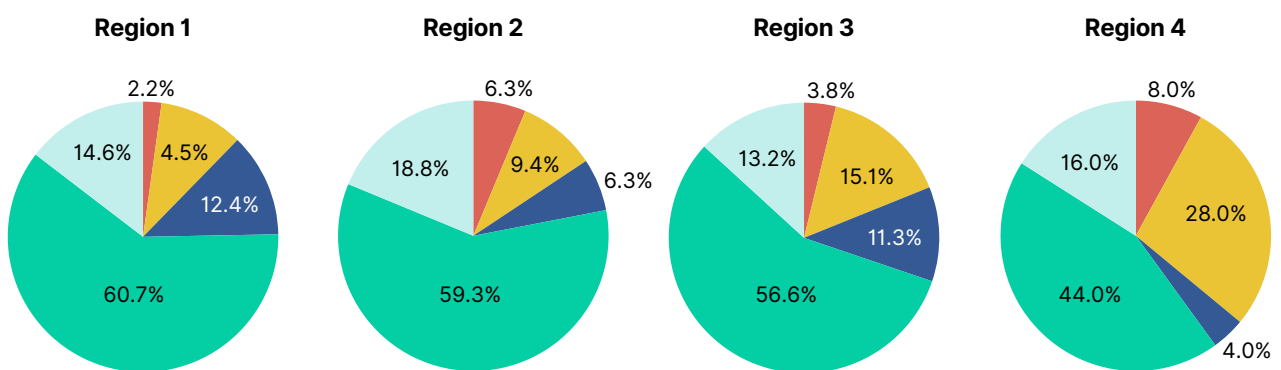
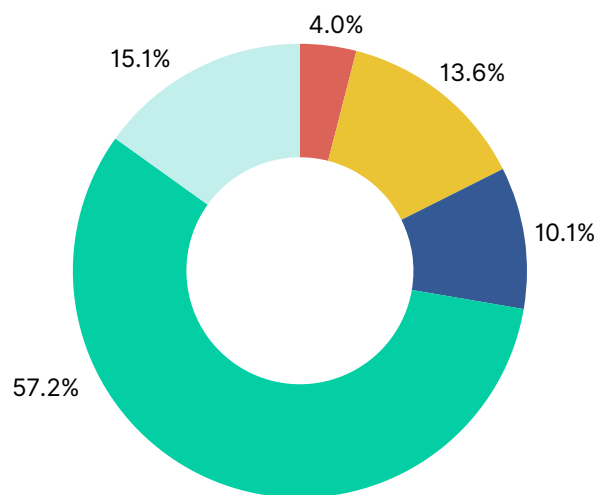
● Strongly Disagree ● Disagree ● Neutral ● Agree ● Strongly Agree



Although the response to the above questions generally depicts a favourable outcome for women’s participation in decision-making, the findings of the following questions show a decline in positive responses indicating that the above does not illustrate the entire picture. When questioned whether other council members respected their opinions and ideas, 72.3% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. However, 17.6% of the respondents also disagreed and strongly disagreed indicating existing challenges in some councils. This is particularly significant in Region 4 where 36% of the respondents believed that their opinions and ideas were not respected by other council members. Discussions pertaining to these statements are further elaborated in the FGD section.

Other council members respect my opinions and ideas.

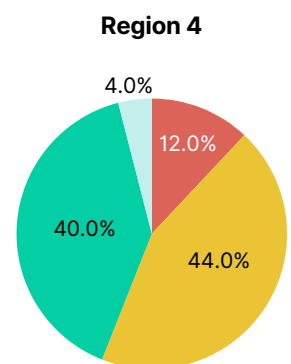
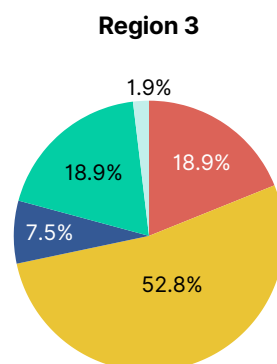
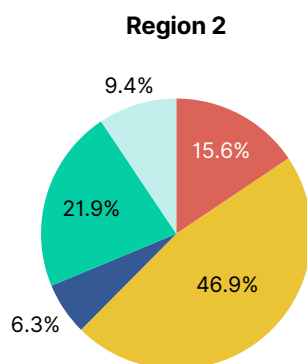
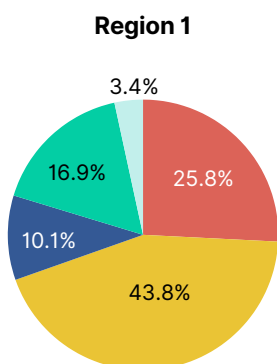
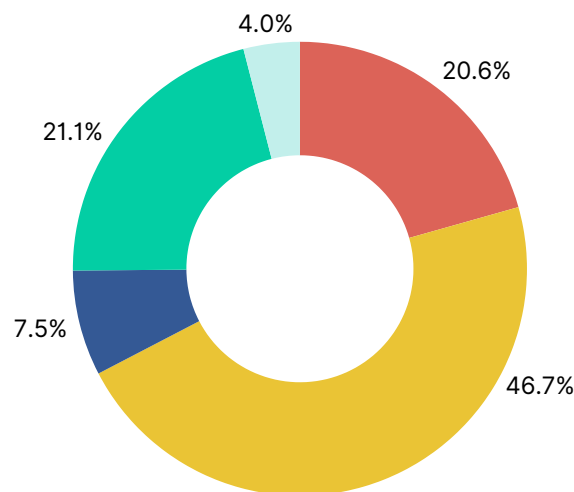
● Strongly Disagree ● Disagree ● Neutral ● Agree ● Strongly Agree



Most of the respondents believed that their suggestions and ideas were included in the planning process, however, relatively fewer respondents than before (total of 67.3%) claim as such. This gap between the response to the current statement and the preceding statements potentially means that while majority of the respondents believed they were able to contribute to discussions on financial matters or collaborative programmes with other organisations, fewer respondents believed that their input was valued or accepted. Similar to the previous question, this finding is particularly significant in Region 4 where 44% of the respondents did not believe that their suggestions and ideas were accepted.

My suggestions and ideas are not included during any planning processes.

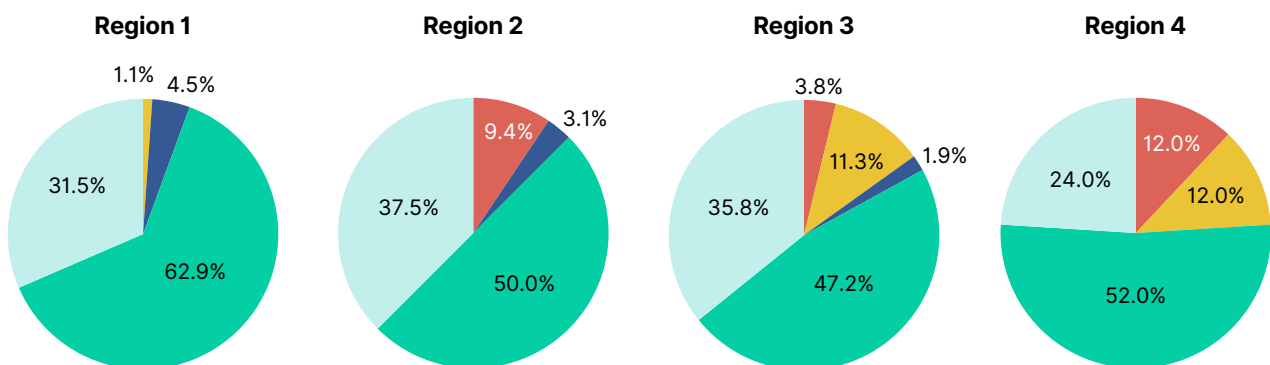
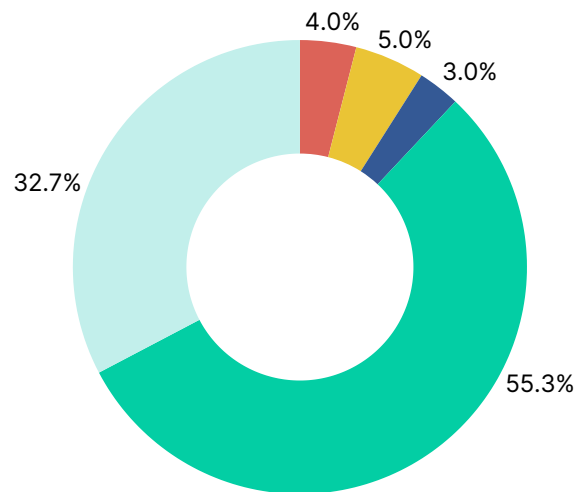
● Strongly Disagree ● Disagree ● Neutral ● Agree ● Strongly Agree



Despite this, a total of 88% of the respondents claimed that their council staff were supportive and assisted in implementing programmes. However, 24% of respondents from Region 4 and 15.1% from Region 3 disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement indicating prevailing challenges for female council members in working with the council staff.

I receive support from the council staff to implement initiatives.

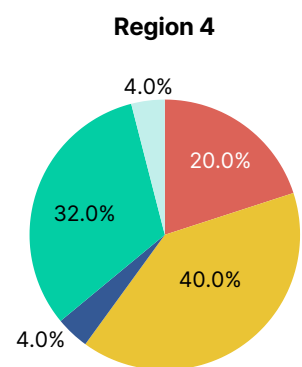
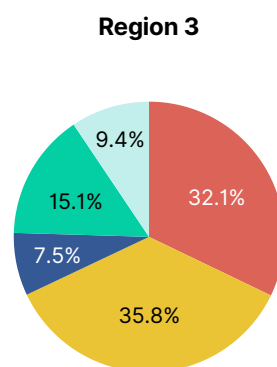
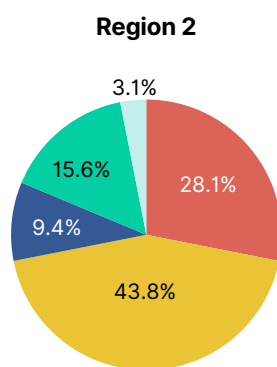
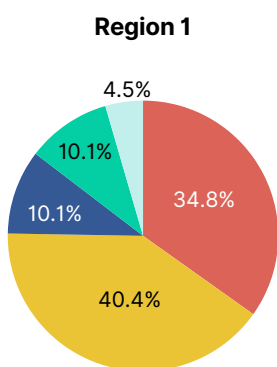
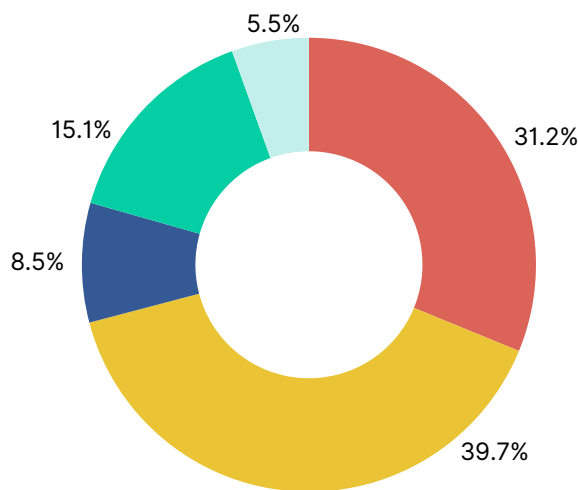
● Strongly Disagree
 ● Disagree
 ● Neutral
 ● Agree
 ● Strongly Agree



Furthermore, a total of 70.9% responded that they do not face any form of harassment from other council members. However, it is worth noting that a considerable percentage of respondents (total of 20.6%) do face harassment. A total of 36% of respondents from Region 4, 24.5% from Region 3, 18.7% from Region 2 and 14.6% from Region 1 admitted to experiencing harassment from other council members. This is further explored in the FGD section.

When I am at work, I face harassment from other council members.

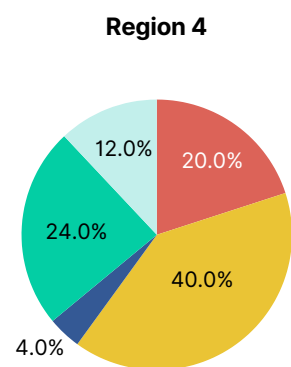
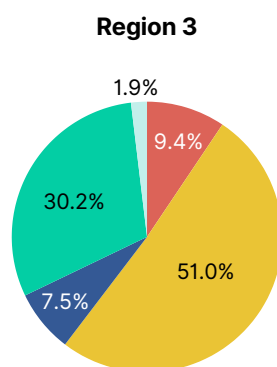
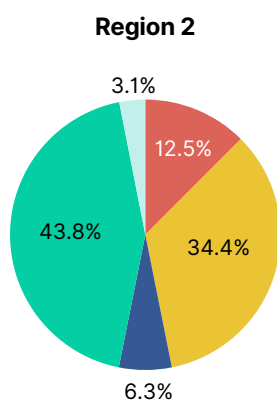
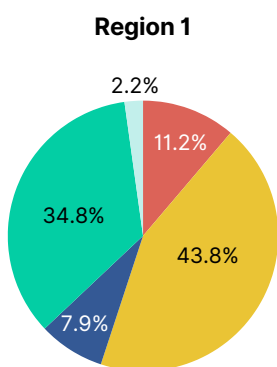
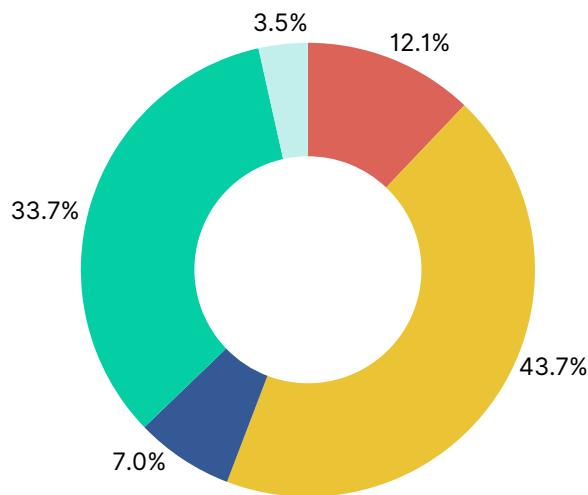
● Strongly Disagree ● Disagree ● Neutral ● Agree ● Strongly Agree



In terms of the roles and responsibilities undertaken by female council members, majority of the participants posit that they do not undertake stereotypically feminine work. However, a total of 37.2% agreed or strongly agreed that they do undertake such work. Findings of the FGDs of the current assessment elaborate on this question and further discuss the participants' varied understanding of the roles and responsibilities that constitute stereotypically feminine and masculine activities.

I am mostly responsible for undertaking work that is considered feminine.

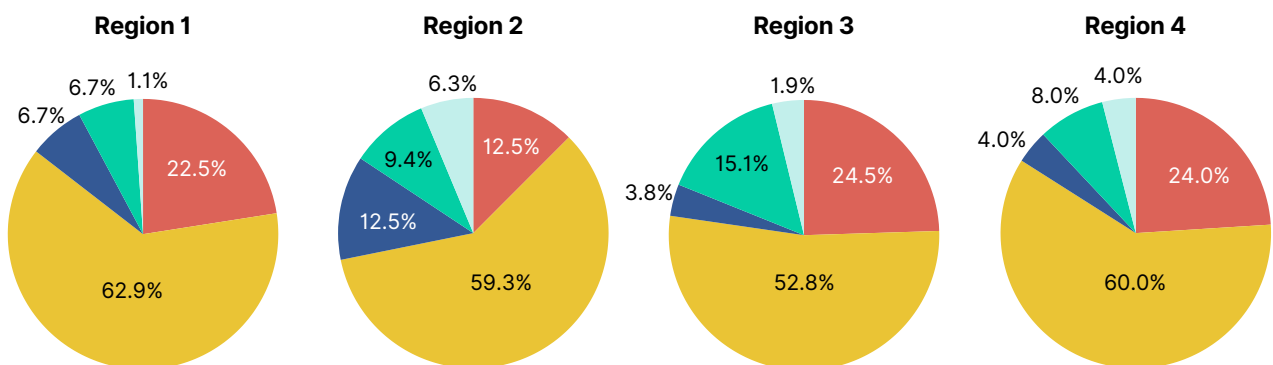
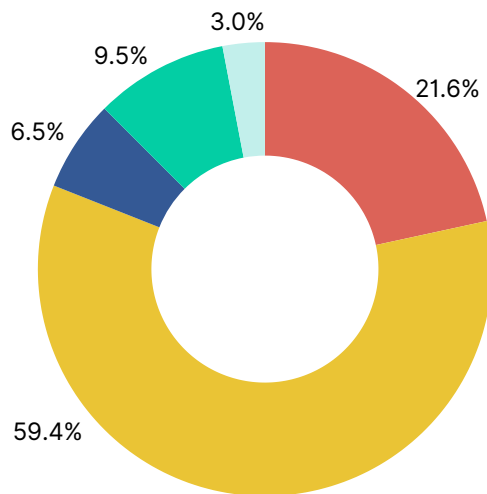
● Strongly Disagree ● Disagree ● Neutral ● Agree ● Strongly Agree



The majority of the respondents (total 81%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement below indicating that they were not necessarily responsible for difficult or laborious work. However, 18.9% of respondents from Region 3 agreed to undertaking difficult or laborious work.

I am primarily responsible for undertaking work that is considered more difficult or laborious.

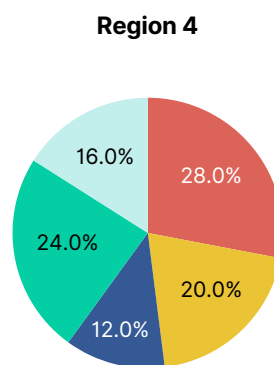
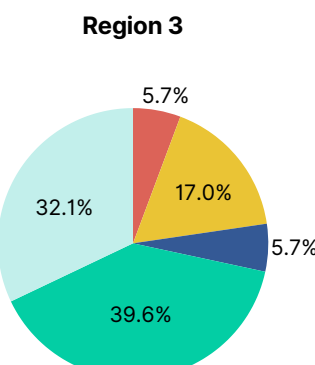
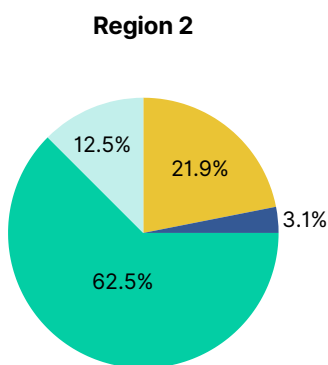
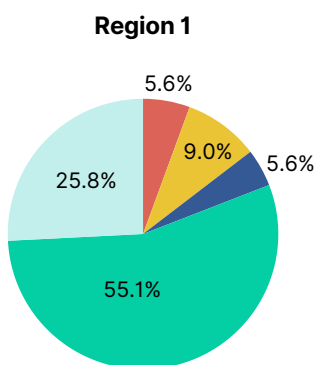
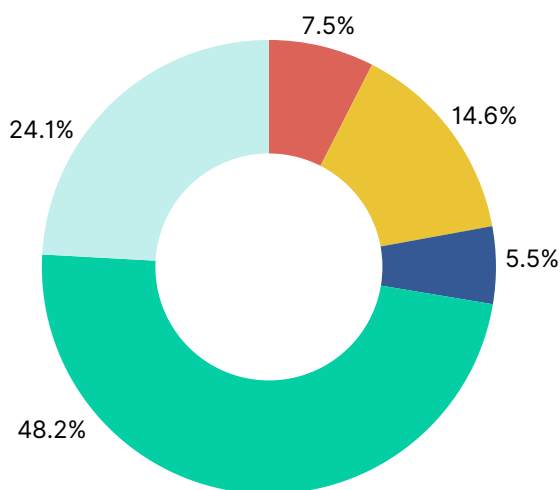
● Strongly Disagree ● Disagree ● Neutral ● Agree ● Strongly Agree



A total of 72.3% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they received equal number of training opportunities as their male counterparts. However, a total of 22.1% also believed that there is gender-based discrimination of the distribution of training opportunities among the council members. This is particularly true for Region 4 where 48% believed that they do not receive equal opportunities to participate in trainings. Likewise, 21.9% and 22.7% of respondents from Regions 2 and 3 respectively, also indicated the same.

I receive as many training opportunities as other male members of the council.

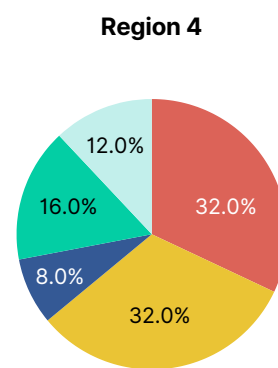
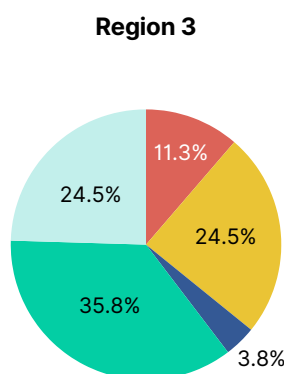
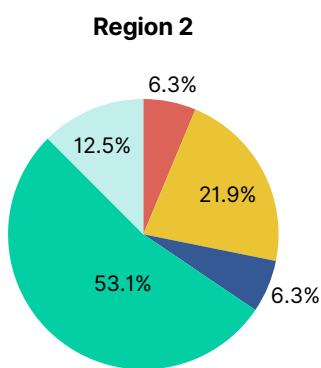
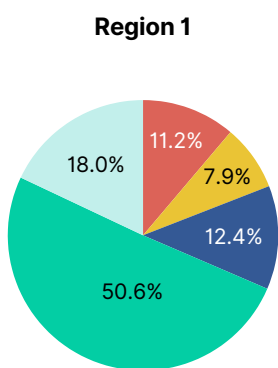
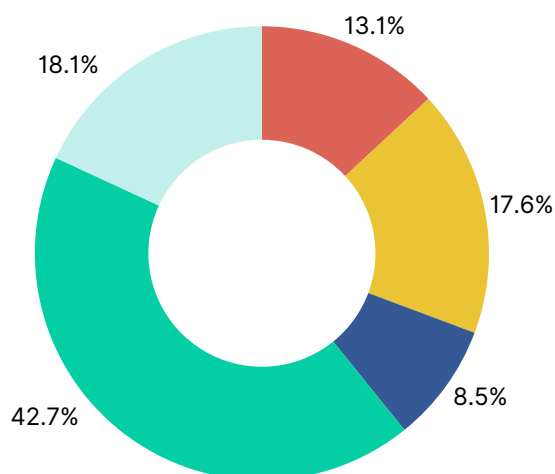
● Strongly Disagree ● Disagree ● Neutral ● Agree ● Strongly Agree



When high-level conferences were included in the equation, comparatively fewer respondents (total of 60.8%) agreed or strongly agreed to have received equal opportunity. Additionally, a total of 30.7% of respondents now stated that they do not receive the same opportunity to participate in such events to which their council is invited. Most significantly, 64% of respondents from Region 4 admitted to experiencing this discrimination. A considerable percentage of respondents from Regions 2 and 3 (28.2% and 35.8% respectively) also faced similar experiences. This also appeared as a key point during the FGDs and will be discussed further in the findings section for FGDs.

I am able to participate in trainings, workshops and high-level conferences to which the council is invited.

● Strongly Disagree ● Disagree ● Neutral ● Agree ● Strongly Agree

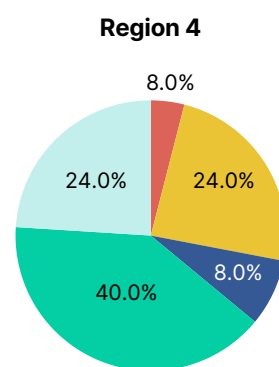
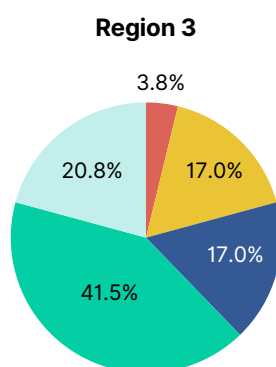
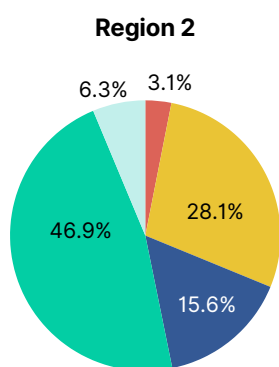
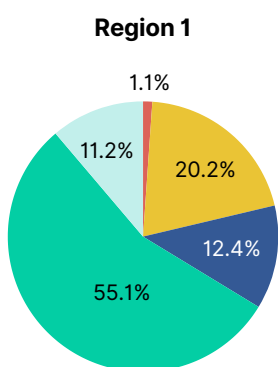
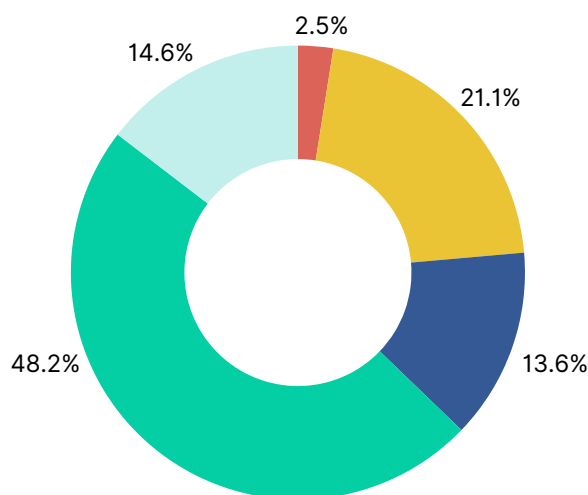


COMMUNITY

The majority of the respondents (total of 62.8%) believed that they received respect from the community as a result of being elected as a council member. However, a considerable number of respondents across all regions, (total of 23.6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement and 13.6% remained neutral.

Becoming a council member has helped me earn the respect of my community.

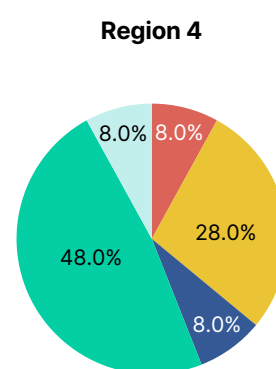
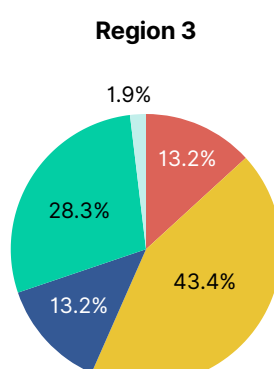
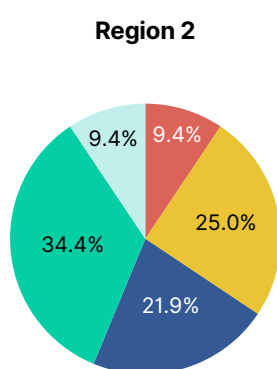
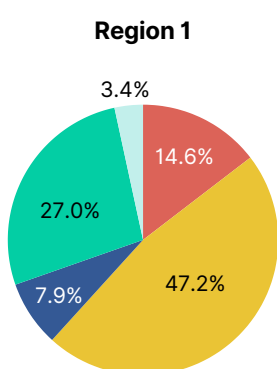
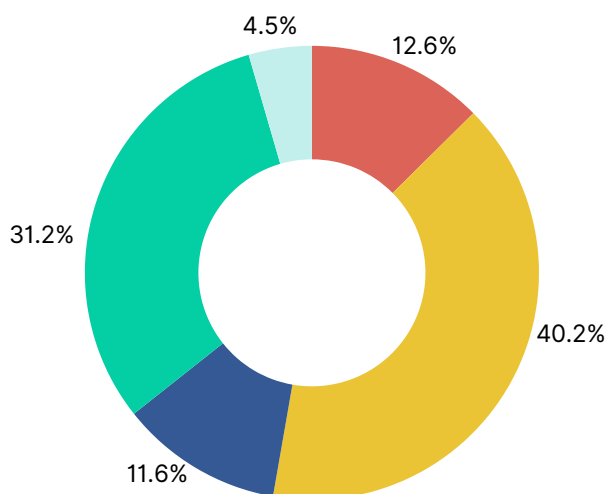
● Strongly Disagree
 ● Disagree
 ● Neutral
 ● Agree
 ● Strongly Agree



Additionally, a greater percentage of respondents (total of 35.7%) compared to the previous question, believed that they faced criticism from the community as a result of being a woman in the council. This finding is especially prominent in Regions 4 and 2 where 56% and 43.8% of respondents respectively either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents do not face any criticisms that stem from negative perceptions towards their gender.

I face a lot of criticism from the community for being a female council member.

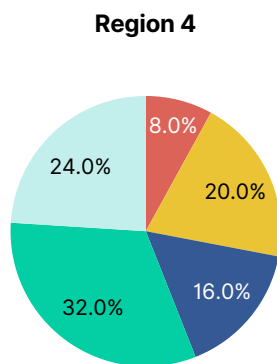
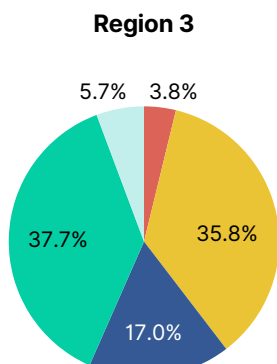
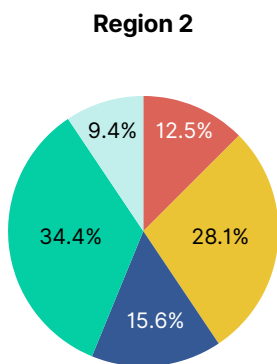
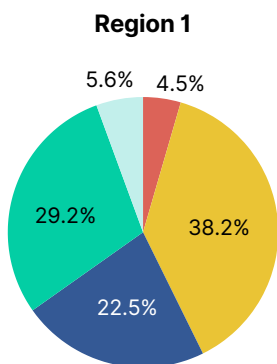
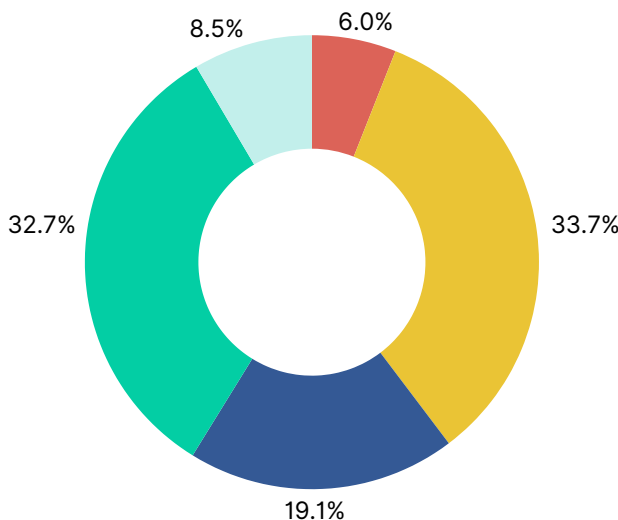
● Strongly Disagree ● Disagree ● Neutral ● Agree ● Strongly Agree



The response to the below statement has been the most balanced with no significant majority overall. A total of 41.2% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that religion is used to limit women’s political participation. At the same time, 39.7% also disagreed or strongly disagreed with this. Furthermore, 19.1% chose to remain neutral. This could indicate the varying levels of conservatism in the island communities or a reluctance to discuss religious perspectives. However, region-disaggregated data shows a clear majority in Region 4 with 56% of the respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, followed closely by Region 3 with 43.4% of respondents in agreement.

Religion has been used as a justification to limit women's participation in politics.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

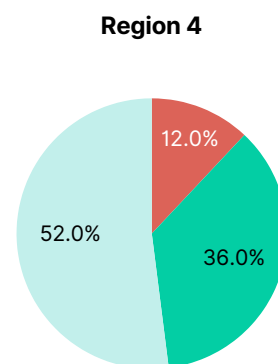
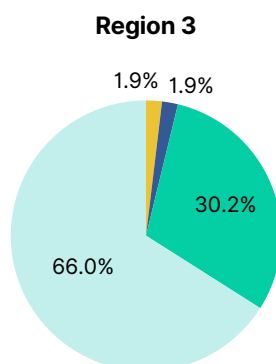
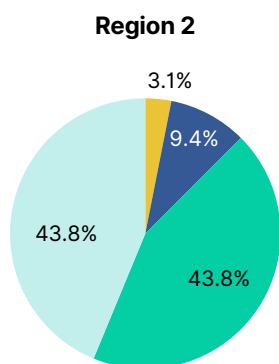
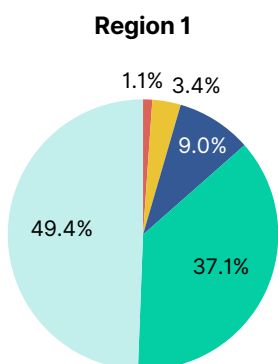
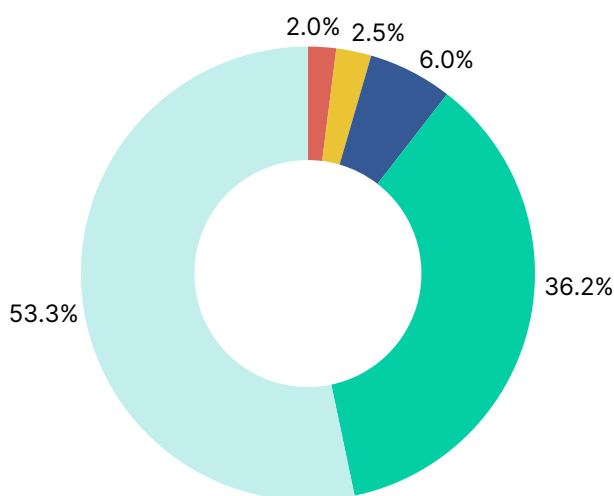


FAMILY

The final two questions pertain to the family as it has been identified in past assessments as a key determinant of women’s ability to participate in the political sphere. As anticipated, a significant percentage of respondents (total of 89.5%) received the support of their family to be active in the political sphere. Only 4.5% of respondents indicated a lack of familial support. Although majority of the respondents from Region 4 strongly agreed with this statement, in comparison to other regions a higher percentage of respondents from Region 4 (12%) strongly disagreed with this statement.

My family supports my decision to pursue a career in the political field.

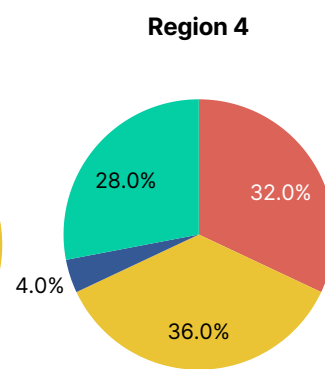
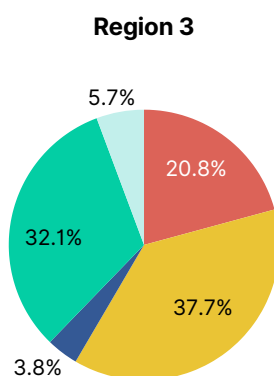
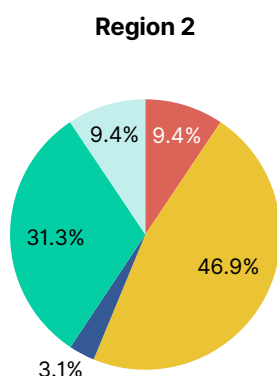
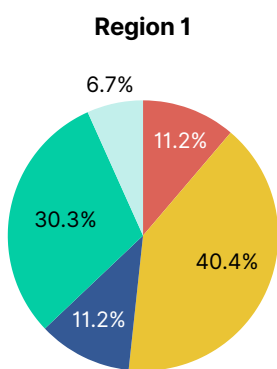
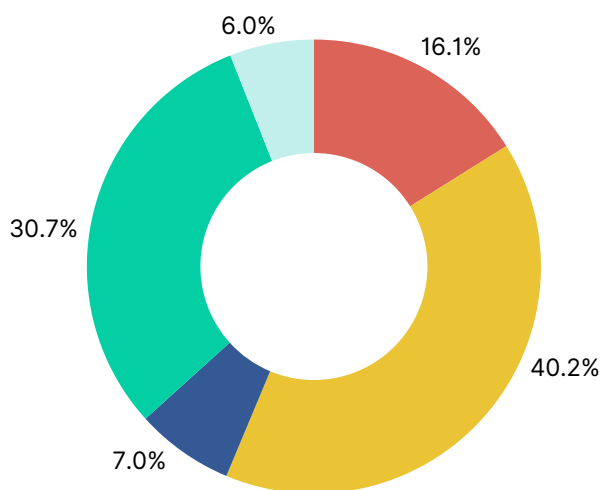
● Strongly Disagree ● Disagree ● Neutral ● Agree ● Strongly Agree



A little more than half of the respondents (total of 56.3%) stated that they do not face any difficulty in undertaking household chores and council responsibilities. However, a considerable percentage of respondents (total of 36.7%) agreed or strongly agreed to feeling overwhelmed by the responsibilities at home and work and region-disaggregated data demonstrates that this experience is similar across all regions. It is evident from the findings of the FGDs that many female council members continue to undertake household and care responsibilities even after being elected to the council. Their experience is shared in greater detail in the findings section for FGDs.

I face difficulty juggling household responsibilities and council work.

● Strongly Disagree ● Disagree ● Neutral ● Agree ● Strongly Agree





**FINDINGS OF THE
FOCUS GROUP
DISCUSSIONS
AND WOMEN IN
LOCAL GOVERNANCE
FORUM**

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

The participants of the FGDs were primarily women currently serving their term as council members. A total of 39 women participated in the FGDs of which six served as vice presidents in their councils. The age of the respondents ranged from 19 – 58 years. Two women were interviewed over the phone due to technical difficulties in connecting to the online meeting. Details of the number of participants representing each atoll and region are provided in the table below.

Atolls	Number of Participants
Region 1	13
H.A.	3
H.Dh.	2
Sh.	2
N.	3
R	2
B.	1
Region 2	7
Lh.	2
K.	1
A.A	2
A.Dh.	1
V.	1

Region 3	14
M.	3
F.	3
Dh.	3
Th.	3
L.	2
Region 4	5
G.A.	2
G.Dh.	2
S.	1
TOTAL	39

Table 5: Number of FGD participants from each atoll and region

The Women in Local Governance Forum was attended by 20 female council members (alongside WDC members). Among them, four women served as vice presidents in their councils. Further details on the number of participants and the atolls represented are provided in the table below.

Atolls	Number of Participants
Region 1	7
H.A.	1
H.Dh.	2
Sh.	1
N.	1
R	1
B.	1
Region 2	4
Lh.	1
A.A	1
A.Dh.	1
V.	1
Region 3	4
M.	1
F.	1
Th.	1
L.	1

Region 4	5
G.A.	1
G.Dh.	2
Gn.	1
S.	1
TOTAL	20

Table 6: Number of Forum participants from each atoll and region

The qualitative component of this assessment includes the combined experience of 59 female council members.

RESULTS

The primary themes that emerged from the discussions with the female council members are categorised into four main institutional realms:

- Council**
- Political Party**
- Community**
- Family**

The themes salient to each realm are discussed further in the sections below.

COUNCIL

Under this institutional realm, five key themes were observed from the discussions: the roles and responsibilities undertaken by female council members, their participation in decision-making during budgetary and planning processes, participation in training opportunities, the perception of other council members and staff towards female councillors and the involvement of PWDs in the council.

Roles and Responsibilities

In terms of dividing the responsibilities and sectors among the council members, nearly all of the FGD participants across all regions stated that the allocation was done based on the council members' interest areas, their qualifications and the field they were involved in prior to being elected. In two instances in Region 1, the allocation was made by the council president but following consultations with the council members on their interests. Only two participants (from Regions 3 and 4) mentioned they were unable to select the sectors and was decided for them by the council president based on the members' capabilities.

Many participants asserted that they did not observe any allocations based on gender and that they were responsible for a wide range of sectors. However, across all regions most of the participants led sectors related to the prevention of gender-based violence and child abuse, monitoring and assisting the disability and migrant community, health, education, youth, sports, community empowerment, WDCs, environment, Islamic activities, admin work, celebrating days, undertaking hospitality for guests, and responsibilities related to women, family, children and the elderly. Only a few participants across all regions were responsible for comparatively different sectors such as undertaking municipal tasks, water and sewage, maintenance of the mosques, historical sites, public spaces and the road. Particularly different was a participant from Region 4, who had to oversee all sectors as their responsibilities were divided based on the ward/district they represented rather than sectors. Additionally, one council in Region 2 had council members involved in all sectors and instead allocated tasks from each sector to different members.

In contrast, participants highlighted that the male councillors were mainly responsible for municipal tasks and large infrastructure projects. While there are exceptional circumstances where all the council members were involved in large projects (as highlighted by a participant from Region 2), mostly men seemed to lead the projects with significant financial investments and were also responsible for stereotypically masculine tasks such as harbour development or maintenance of street lights.

It is evident from the experience of nearly all the participants that the process undertaken to divide the responsibilities intended to be equal for the most part. However, internalised pre-conceptions of feminine and masculine roles in both male and female council members have guided the division of responsibilities. For instance, two participants in Regions 1 and 3 stated that when dividing the sectors the council members discussed and decided against allocating responsibilities that would be too difficult for women such as maintenance of street lights or harbour development. Another participant in Region 2 noted that due to family responsibilities, female councillors were primarily in charge of admin work within the council premises whereas the male council members were allocated work that entailed visiting other places on the island. However, such extreme circumstances as the latter example did not exist in most councils and women were active in undertaking programmes in the community albeit in stereotypically feminized sectors such as education, health and community empowerment.

The Forum participants also agreed to being assigned feminine roles and cited cultural norms as the reasoning behind being allocated tasks such as decorating for events or cooking for guests. In addition, they also shared situations that stemmed from the prevailing belief that women were not capable of undertaking tasks in certain areas. For instance, female councillors were removed from certain sectors after they had completed proposals/concepts during the planning stage. The implementation phase was then assigned to a male councillor instead.

Participation in Decision-making

An overwhelming majority of FGD participants in Regions 1, 2 and 3 agreed that they received the opportunity to contribute to the decisions made by the council, particularly pertaining to the annual work and budget planning. While the councils had differing methods for undertaking their annual planning processes, it was generally guided by the five-year development plans developed by each council at the beginning of their term and was also dependent on emerging needs identified in consultation with stakeholders on the island. Prioritisation of activities for annual plans was also based on discussions with stakeholders and the community. Each council member was then allowed to propose ideas for activities related to the sectors that they led. The activities were finalised after discussing with all the council members, and in some councils in consultation with the relevant staff in the council. In this regard, the participants believed that they were able to actively partake in decision-making and that their opinions and ideas were accepted and valued by the other council members. One participant noted that her peers made an extra effort to ensure that the female councillors were included during the planning process. Participants also generally believed that the female council members had the most influence in deciding matters related to women's issues.

In stark contrast, the majority of the FGD participants in Region 4 strongly believed that their opinions were not accepted by other council members. They were able to contribute to annual planning discussions but have experienced circumstances where their propositions were continuously challenged or rejected. They have faced harassment from other council members including snide remarks regarding the incompetency of female council members. One participant mentioned that she was humiliated by a male council member in front of stakeholder organisations and cited her differing views as a reason to not elect women for councils. The experience has left her demotivated and she does not want to contest for an additional term. Some participants also stated that they were left out of discussions on larger projects undertaken by the councils or during emergencies.

There have also been circumstances where certain projects were included in their annual plans without the knowledge of the female councillors and they only heard about it from people in the community. The belief that women do not need to be consulted on certain matters such as when announcing bids for infrastructure projects still exists in some communities. Additionally, a participant from Region 1 highlighted that the council's voting process is currently in the favour of the male council members as they hold the majority. The male councillors discuss beforehand the stance they would like to adopt and thus the decisions are made to their liking. For instance, the council wanted to conduct an official visit to Male' to meet the government ministries but the male council members did not want to include any female councillors in the delegation. Given that they hold the majority, the decision was made to not include any women in the delegation as they had preferred.

Participants of the Forum had varying experiences in this regard. Some female council members were able to partake in strategic-level discussions or those related to larger projects while others were not. In addition, participants shared difficulties in working with the administrative head of their council (the Secretary-General). According to several participants the SG posed a significant barrier for female council members to participate in decision-making or implementation of programmes in many councils represented at the forum. The participants also noted facing harassment from other council members when they refused to engage in practices that would enable corruption. Notably, the participants also highlighted the disadvantage of not having any female representation in atoll councils and the cascading effects that this has on their island councils.

Training Opportunities

The majority of the FGD participants across all regions believed that they do receive equal opportunity to participate in training programmes and workshops by their councils. In some councils, the member was decided after discussing it with all the council members. In others, the decision was made based on the subject area of the training programme and the councillor leading the relevant sector. One council aimed to send at least one female and male member if the opportunity was provided.

However, as some participants highlighted, many female council members faced greater difficulty in joining training programmes due to family responsibilities rather than not receiving the opportunity from the councils. For instance, most of these programmes were held outside of their residential island. Female councillors were then unable to travel as they could not leave behind their children or faced difficulties in finding helpers to travel with them. One participant from Region 4 also noted that she was unable to join a recent knowledge exchange programme as her husband did not allow it indicating the influence of spouses on female councillors' participation. Additionally, another council member from Region 2 also highlighted that the education level of the female councillor has also resulted in missed opportunities in the past. Apart from these barriers, some participants from Regions 3 and 4 stated that there were no discussions internally when the council received an invitation and it was usually the council leadership that decided which council member would attend. This has led to situations where the male councillors received more opportunities to attend high-level conferences and forums than their female counterparts. This finding aligns with that identified during the survey where a considerable number of respondents also believed that they did not receive the opportunity to attend such high-level events.

Nonetheless, nearly all of the FGD participants from all regions agreed that the primary issue was an immense lack of training programmes available to council members from LGA or other organisations. Some participants contended that the programmes targeting female council members have been especially limited during the past few years and it was usually the council president and the WDC president who were invited to join the recent programmes. They believed that many women still hesitated to voice their opinions in atoll or national-level forums and needed more opportunities to participate in such programmes to build their confidence. Other participants argued that the male councillors received even fewer opportunities and asserted that it could be biased thinking on the part of the organisers that women are incompetent and thus need more training. The participants believed that both female and male council members required more training opportunities as most of them have been elected for the first time and it is important to build the capacity of the council as a whole rather than a certain group in the council.

The Forum participants also echoed similar experiences where most female councillors have received the opportunity to participate in training programmes but there were some councils where the council leadership decided without the knowledge of the female council members. An additional point they highlighted was the inequality between island and city councils in receiving opportunities to participate in trainings or forums, thus further limiting the ability of female council members belonging to island councils to participate in training programmes and forums.

Perception of Council Members and Staff

Some FGD participants asserted that the male councillors still perceived female council members negatively. A participant from Region 1 described the lack of attention that the male council members, especially the council leadership, gave to programmes implemented by the female councillors. The male council members rarely became involved or attended the opening or closing ceremonies of the events. Another participant from Region 2 faced passive-aggressive actions from her male counterparts who shared posts on social media citing religion to promote the message that women should not be in positions of authority. She theorized that it could have stemmed from existing beliefs or have been fuelled by envy or insecurities as a result of the community's increasing acknowledgement of female council members.

A considerable number of participants faced difficulties due to the lack of acceptance from the council staff. Participants from Region 3 believed that they did not have any power despite being council members as the council staff only listened to the instructions of the council president or vice president. Hence, they were unable to implement programmes effectively. Two participants from Region 4 shared instances where the council staff had tried to create conflict within the council and further slandered them on social media for confronting the staff about it. However, one posited that the opposition from staff could be due to political division rather than gender. A participant from Region 1 further mentioned instances where council staff (all men except for one) made inappropriate sexual remarks at the beginning of her term, but this has slowly changed and the staff are more respectful now.

Some of the Forum participants also shared experiences where they were considered to be inferior to their male counterparts by other council members and staff. One participant was harassed by her colleagues with remarks such as calling her worse than COVID-19. The participants also believed that the perception that women are incompetent and cannot provide valuable input still existed. This belief is also internalised and perpetuated by women including female councillors. One FGD participant from Region 2 claimed that it was more important to have island development committees instead of WDCs as men were smarter and more capable, and needed to be represented in such committees.

Despite the abovementioned experiences, a vast majority of participants from Regions 1, 2 and 3 affirmed that they operated in a very positive work environment within the council and have not faced any gender-based discrimination from the council members or the staff. Participants stated that they received encouragement from the council leadership to undertake responsibilities in non-stereotypical sectors and both the members and staff valued their input on issues related to a wide variety of sectors. One participant from Region 2 recalled being mentally prepared to face discrimination when she was elected but faced far fewer difficulties than she anticipated. In fact, the council members and staff have grown so confident in her abilities that they frequently requested her guidance on programme implementation. Another participant from Region 2 added that the views of the staff employed for municipal tasks in her council were also changing. Previously the staff were managed by the vice president (a male councillor), but the workers have since requested a female councillor to oversee their work instead which indicated that their attitudes towards women's capabilities especially in non-stereotypical sectors were slowly shifting. A participant from Region 3 shared the willingness of her male colleagues to help her learn about new areas that she was unfamiliar with. A Forum participant from Region 1 further asserted that the council environment has changed drastically compared to previous years and she is now able to work effectively alongside the council team.

Involvement of the Disability Community

All the FGD participants stated that the main programme that their councils undertook was regular visits to PWDs to identify needs and concerns, provide assistance to access government schemes or acquire assistive products, celebrate the International Day of Persons with Disabilities and distribute gifts to PWDs. Two participants from Regions 1 and 3 also stated that their councils have compiled a registry of PWDs residing in their islands which helped them to monitor and provide assistance to the disability community in their island. Some participants from Regions 1, 2 and 3 also mentioned that the council was currently working on ensuring that public spaces such as beaches, mosques and schools were accessible to PWDs and to ensure they are included in community events such as Eid festivals. Only two participants from Regions 2 and 3 mentioned that PWDs were involved in council committees and were active in disaster response teams, albeit in extremely few numbers. Another participant from Region 3 asserted that the deaf community in their island was quite active and the council encouraged them to participate in various programmes.

However, in most islands, PWDs, whether women or men remain excluded from community development. Most participants maintained that the lack of PWD-specific programmes was due to the limited number of PWDs residing on the island. Other participants contended that communication barriers played a huge role in their inability to involve PWDs to a greater extent. Two participants from Regions 2 and 4 disclosed that the council was not able to consult PWDs and did not obtain their input as much as they should. As OPDs had mentioned during the stakeholder consultations, electing more women to the councils has not automatically increased the priority given to the disability community, thus underscoring a great need to adopt an intersectional lens and introduce measures to ensure PWD inclusion in community development.

POLITICAL PARTY

The discussions undertaken with the participants of the FGDs and the Forum revealed two key themes; the support provided by political parties to female candidates and the challenges faced by women in political parties. These themes are elaborated further in the sections below.

Support Provided to Female Electoral Candidates

Across all regions, a large majority of the FGD participants who represented political parties received immense support from their parties during campaigning. Assistance from the party included designing and printing banners and posters, conducting door-to-door campaigning or calling constituents to secure votes, arranging interviews for the candidates, sharing campaign messages on social media platforms and organising events. Most of the support from the party was provided collectively to all the candidates representing that party, for instance, organising events and setting up party spaces (“Jagaha”) where they invited constituents for lunch or dinners. Two participants from Regions 1 and 3 added that their party assisted male and female candidates equally. Another participant from Region 1 claimed that she received even more support from her party to campaign because she was a female candidate.

Additionally, political parties also covered campaign expenses for most of the participants. This included costs to organise large events, catering for lunch/dinner/coffees with constituents, printing posters and banners, and travel expenses. Notably, there were two participants from Regions 2 and 4 who were not interested in contesting for the council but did so at the request of their respective parties. Hence, it was their parties who actively campaigned for them instead of the candidates themselves.

However, some participants did not receive significant support from their party despite contesting as a party candidate. Two participants from Regions 2 and 3 asserted they did not receive any kind of support, while others from Regions 1, 3 and 4 received some support for campaigning but had to cover their campaign expenses using their funds or with assistance from family and friends.

Challenges

Women have become increasingly involved in political parties over the past few years. However, they continue to face considerable challenges as a result of gender biases among party members. Similar to the findings of past assessments, the Forum participants highlighted the lack of opportunities for women to be involved in party leadership. They argued that even within political parties there is a belief that women should not be in decision-making roles and the opportunity is given to men instead. Even when women were elected as council members, they did not receive due respect from party members. One Forum participant recalled a time when she nominated herself for the vice president post in her party but was requested by the senior leadership to withdraw her nomination as they were supporting another male candidate. Participants noted that this belief was also reflected in the party's candidate lists for elected positions such as for member of parliament, where significantly more men received support from the party to contest as party candidates. It also resulted in limited training opportunities for women by the party to help them reach senior positions.

The FGD participants also felt pressured by their parties to exercise political patronage where they were expected to provide favours to members of their party. An FGD participant from Region 4, highlighted the expectation from her fellow party members to provide jobs for them or rent council assets such as vehicles for no charge. She expressed frustration with these expectations as she believed that council members need to abide by the established policies and procedures for the good of the community. A Forum participant from Region 1 also shared a similar experience where she was pressured by her party to vote for a specific person as the vice president of the council. Both these participants remained steadfast in their decision to prioritise the community instead of their party needs but their failure to comply resulted in varying degrees of retaliation. An FGD participant from Region 4 shared receiving backlash from her party members (along with other members in her community) which included harassment on social media. The harassment escalated into the fabrication and distribution of an explicit video perpetrated by senior members of the local party branch. However, she received no redress from the party or via formal mechanisms in law enforcement due to limitations in legislation. The incident has negatively impacted her mental well-being.

COMMUNITY

The majority of the FGD participants, particularly from Regions 1, 2 and 3, stated that their island communities were very supportive and generally had positive attitudes towards female council members. They highlighted the role of the community, especially the women, in encouraging the participants to contest for the council. Participants from Region 1 also received positive feedback from the community which included claims of the current councils being the best they have experienced so far. The community also believed that the councils were now more willing to implement programmes requested by the community such as the establishment of a council-managed preschool and Quran competitions during Ramadan. The participants were often approached by women, the elderly and even young people with suggestions and ideas for programmes.

Participants from Region 2 also stated that they were respected by their island communities and were believed to be capable of successfully achieving results for the community. Although there were incidents where the community disagreed with the decisions made by the council, the participants claimed they had not faced any harassment from the community members. In fact, the participants posit that the women in their islands would get elected to the council even if the quota was removed. Another participant from Region 1 reported that her island community was previously known for having conservative beliefs and women being elected to political positions was viewed negatively. However, since the implementation of the quota and with more women being elected to the council, the perception of the community towards female council members has changed.

Nonetheless, the situation is not equally positive in all parts of the country. Participants from all the regions have faced negative experiences working with community members who still believed that women were not capable of undertaking certain responsibilities such as overseeing matters related to the mosques. Some participants from Regions 1 and 2 highlighted that such conservative beliefs were predominantly held by elderly people, especially those who have served in political positions in the past. A participant from Region 2 described an incident where elderly men in the community pressured the council to allocate a male council member to hoist the flag at a national-level event on their island when it was the female council members who had undertaken all the work to organise the event.

The belief that women should stay at home and undertake household tasks and care responsibilities persists to varying degrees in all regions. Two participants from Region 3 received comments from friends and community members that contesting for an elected position did not suit the participants as women. Some even claimed outright that they would not vote for the participants. An FGD participant from Region 2 and Forum participants stated that religious arguments were used extensively in their communities to prevent women from contesting for elected positions. Some community members promoted the belief that women belonged in their homes and that society would fall to ruin if women were elected to positions of power. Participants from Region 4 also shared the attempts made by other male councillors and men in their political parties to create conflict between the participants and the community. This has resulted in the participants facing increasing incidences of harassment from the community and a lack of acceptance and recognition of their work.

Forum participants also primarily discussed the negative perceptions prevalent in their communities. Similar to the FGD participants, they reiterated the prevalence of gender norms in their community perpetuated by both men and women that confine women's roles to their homes. Additionally, there is a lack of acceptance from the community for women contesting for political positions and working in mixed-gender settings. Religious interpretations are then used to give power to such narratives. The Forum participants also stated that the belief that women do not have the capability to provide valid inputs or undertake council tasks persists in their communities.

FAMILY

The two key themes explored under this realm pertain to the family members' perception towards women contesting for the local council and managing family responsibilities alongside council work which are further elaborated in the sections below.

Family Members' Perception

With the exception of only two, the remaining FGD participants from all regions highlighted the immense support they received from their families to successfully contest for the position. Participants shared the encouragement they received from their family and friends to initially nominate themselves for the council and the assistance they received in campaigning. Family members helped participants across all regions to undertake door-to-door campaigning, call constituents, design and install posters and cook for campaign events. For many participants who received little to no financial assistance from their parties or who contested as independent candidates, their campaign expenses were largely covered by their families and friends.

A participant from Region 1 mentioned that her family was not active in the political field but took the initiative to help her with campaigning. Similarly, other participants from Regions 1 and 4 also shared that despite their families being involved with the opposing political party or having conflicting political opinions, they set aside their differences to support the participants and help with the campaigning. One of the participants from Region 3 who stated that she received limited support from her family, also mentioned that she received a lot of votes in her favour due to her family. She explained that in most of the island communities in her atoll, there was a tendency to vote for candidates with familial relations.

However, participants, particularly from Regions 1, 3 and 4 also noted that in general, negative attitudes of family members became barriers for women to participate in political positions. The participants have observed husbands preventing women from contesting as they believed that their wives would be more preoccupied with council work and would not be able to dedicate more time to their families. Husbands have also stopped women from participating in programmes outside of the island for similar reasons.

A participant from Region 4 was facing similar challenges as her family had become less supportive since the election. Her husband particularly, has complained that she was not spending enough time at home. Another participant from Region 3 stated that she received criticisms from her family members as they believed women should prioritise taking care of children and should only contest for such positions when their children are adults.

Managing Family Responsibilities

As the Forum participants highlighted, the belief that women should be the primary caretakers and undertake all the responsibilities of the household remains deeply ingrained in Maldivian communities. As such, even when women are elected to political positions, they have to undertake their household responsibilities alongside their work. The majority of the FGD participants across all regions faced this double burden and woke up extra early to complete all their household duties before leaving for council. Nearly all of them relied on the support from their families to take care of their children and do household chores. They admitted that they would not be able to undertake council work if not for the support from their spouses and families. Some participants, from all regions, noted having an equal division of responsibilities with their husbands. However, a considerable number of participants, especially single parents, relied on their mothers and other family members for help.

Many FGD participants shared that they wanted to prove to the community that they have the capability to undertake both responsibilities and be role models for younger generations. However, some participants admitted that they struggled to manage both which is similar to responses received for the survey. Given the substantial time and energy required for both household and council duties, participants admitted feeling exhausted as they did not have adequate time to rest. One participant from Region 3 stated that male council members can usually afford to prioritise their “me” time, but female council members usually have to sacrifice theirs to give time to their families. Furthermore, they faced challenges in joining programmes outside of the island as they cannot leave their children behind and for many participants, it was difficult to find or afford helpers to accompany them. One participant further stated that society, including other female councillors, should not glamourize women as people who can do everything. Instead, it should be promoted that women also need help and support from other people.

It is worth noting that four participants from four regions reported that they faced no challenges in this regard as they had limited to no family responsibilities. Each participant's circumstance was different and they either lived alone, had children who were grown up and independent or had helpers employed to take care of household chores. As such, they can dedicate as much time to council work as necessary without any qualms.

The experiences of the participants give strength to the findings of past assessments where supportive families were identified as key determinants of success for female candidates. Their experience also indicates that families play an important role in assisting to undertake household work even after they become elected due to deep-seated beliefs that women need to bear the primary or sole responsibility for household and care responsibilities whether they are employed or not. Furthermore, it is also increasingly evident that all female council members do not experience the double burden equally. Those from different socio-economic backgrounds have differing access to help that either expands or limits their access to opportunities such as participating in trainings and knowledge exchange programmes.

IMPACT OF RESERVED SEATS

Despite the short period of time (three years), since the implementation of the 33% quota for women in local councils, the participants reported observing changes in the community and the council's functioning. Most notably, the majority of the participants from all regions stated that the perception of the community towards women in elected positions was slowly becoming more positive. Some participants from Regions 1, 2 and 3 shared that the community used to view working in local councils as a masculine occupation. This is in part due to the belief that activities such as harbour development, cutting down trees to clear land and organising visits for important dignitaries were considered to be stereotypically masculine tasks. However, with an increasing number of women becoming council members and undertaking similar tasks, the image of council members as masculine figures has started to shift. Participants from Region 1 further claimed that most of the community members preferred to discuss their concerns with female council members. As a result, the relationship between the council and the community has improved. A participant from Region 1 also asserted that the increase in female councillors has contributed to greater acceptance of women being involved in public activities.

Participants from all regions also highlighted positive changes for the women in the community. They observed that women were more open and comfortable sharing their opinions and concerns with the councils. Participants from Regions 1 and 3 noted that the quota has been a positive driving force and has encouraged women to become more active in community development activities and pursue political opportunities. A participant from Region 3 observed an increase in the participation of women in town hall meetings on her island. During an initial meeting to discuss plans for the beach area only two women joined, but during the second meeting, the number of women had increased to 40. The meeting benefitted from the distinct discussion points raised by women and men. Men had suggested to dedicate the area to build boats and generate income whereas the women discussed the importance of keeping the area open for family picnics. A participant from Region 1 reported that the increased participation of women in councils has also had cascading effects on other areas. For instance, there were more sports tournaments targeted at women on her island now.

Participants from Regions 1, 3 and 4 also described changes within the council. Aside from greater opportunities for women to contribute to decision-making within the council, a participant from Region 1 also reported that the council's admin staff have found it easier to share their concerns with the council members. Initially, they were hesitant to discuss the issues within the council but have since become more open to doing so which has resulted in better teamwork and performance. Participants from Region 4 stated that the increase in female council members has also promoted accountability within the councils. They believed that in the past male councillors frequently spent time away from work and undertook practices that enabled corruption in the councils. However, female councillors in their communities have since worked tirelessly to curb these practices.

Nonetheless, not all changes have been positive. As a direct and unintended negative outcome of the quota, participants from Regions 3 and 4 reported that there is a widespread belief among both men and women that women can only contest for the reserved seats as these are the "female" seats. The participants also experienced pressure from party members to only contest for the reserved seats as they claimed women had been designated special seats, hence leaving the other seats for men. In addition, a few participants from all the regions noted that there has not been a significant change in their community's perceptions towards women in leadership positions. The belief that women cannot undertake certain tasks or that women should remain at home to take care of children still prevails in many communities. Furthermore, the existence of such beliefs even within the councils has led to discrimination against female council members. One participant from Region 4 stated that even if the quota for women was increased to 50%, the prevalence of such beliefs would continue to limit women's ability to meaningfully participate and succeed as councillors. A participant from Region 2 further highlighted that the quota should be complemented by other approaches to address the different barriers women face to fully participate in decision-making.



EXPERIENCE OF MALE COUNCIL MEMBERS

Five male council members from different islands, atolls and cities were also interviewed during the initial stakeholder consultations to gain insights into their experiences and challenges. In contrast with the diverse experiences of female councillors captured in this assessment, the accounts of male council members are quite limited due to the established parameters of the study. However, these consultations have demonstrated comparable trends between female and male councillors.

In some respects, the male council members shared similarities with their female counterparts. For instance, even among the five members they had varying levels of support from the political parties during campaigning. Some had received only in-kind support while others received financial assistance, and one received no assistance at all. Furthermore, the family members of all councillors were supportive and forthcoming about their interest in pursuing a political career. Male councillors, particularly from the island councils, also mentioned that they did not receive sufficient training opportunities which echoed sentiments from female councillors at the Forum who had highlighted a disparity between island and city councils in receiving opportunities to participate in trainings and forums.

Nonetheless, there exist stark differences in the issues faced by male and female council members. Notably, none of the male council members identified any challenges they faced due to their gender. Instead, the issues highlighted by all council members pertained to the functioning of the council. These are related to the governance of the council such as lack of effective policies, inequalities between the councils and the central government that undermine the councils' power and ability to fulfil their mandate, and other admin issues such as hiring adequate and qualified staff. Only one identified the lack of work-life balance as a key issue as council members were expected to be available 24/7. Others admitted that they did not face any challenges partaking in decision-making or in their family life.

One unique challenge identified by the male city council members was the disruption to their political careers as they might be unable to contest for another term due to the rotation of the reserved seats for women among the constituencies in the city. This means that during the next election, if their constituency is determined as a reserved seat by a draw held by the Elections Commission (EC), they will not be able to contest for that particular constituency for another consecutive term. While these city council members recognised the importance of ensuring women were included in the local councils and had a positive attitude towards implementing TSM to ensure women's participation, their recommendation was to revise the methodology of the TSM to address the challenge they faced.

Despite the constraints in understanding the experiences of male councillors, these consultations have helped identify potential focal areas that needs to be discussed further to address the challenges faced by male councillors and strengthen the council in a holistic manner.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the survey, FGD and the Forum discussions reaffirmed some of the key themes highlighted in the past assessments and stakeholder consultations. Female council members revealed the challenges they faced in reaching leadership positions within political parties and contesting for elected positions as party candidates. This was identified in the brief published by UNDP in 2017 indicating the pervasiveness of the issue in political parties. Similarly, the study conducted by IFES and the findings of the stakeholder consultations for this assessment identified the burden that women carried by continuing to undertake the role of the primary caretaker even after becoming elected. Thus, family support, both to pursue a political career and in terms of providing assistance to undertake women's domestic responsibilities was identified as a key factor of success for women. The accounts of female council members during the FGDs and the response to the survey confirm the relevance of these findings.

Furthermore, it is also evident from the FGDs that the female council members are primarily responsible for tasks related to feminized sectors across the country as was observed by stakeholders. The importance of using an intersectional lens for policy, planning and implementation also became increasingly evident during the FGDs. Women and men are unable to fully represent their communities given the diverse nature of people's intersecting identities. Increased efforts to include people from various disabilities and socioeconomic backgrounds in development activities are critical to creating an equal society.

44 UNDP (2017) *Women's Political Participation in the Maldives: Issue Brief*

45 IFES (2014) *Women's Empowerment in Political Processes in Maldives*

Nevertheless, the results of the current assessment also demonstrate the diversity of island contexts across the country. While it is certainly true that some female councillors do face challenges in contributing to planning and decision-making processes as stakeholders observed, the experience is not shared universally across all the regions. In fact, the majority of the participants of the survey and FGDs asserted that they were able to meaningfully participate in decision-making including contributing to discussions on financial matters.

Most importantly, the assessment underscores the importance of considering the nuanced contexts in which female council members exist. For some islands, female councillors had already been elected during past election cycles and are well-respected in the community. However, for other islands, the belief that women need to stay at home and solely focus on the private domain is the prevailing notion in the community. The degree of effectiveness of the TSM is then exceedingly dependent on these differing factors that constitute an enabling environment for women's meaningful participation.

As such, the findings of the assessment illustrate the importance of considering the TSM as one component of a micro-system and undertaking additional programming to address the other themes highlighted in the FGD findings. In light of this, the following section outlines the recommendations from the participants of the FGD and Forum for additional measures and programming to advance women's participation in local governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommended Actions	Stakeholders
1. Community	
<p>1.1 Implement awareness and advocacy programmes targeting the community and families to promote women’s role in elected positions. Such programmes should include areas such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on the Decentralisation Act. • The importance of implementing the 33% quota for women. • Importance of women in elected positions, especially leadership roles. • Benefits of equal participation of both genders in decision-making. • Addressing the belief that reserved seats remove opportunities for men. 	<p>LGA NGOs Political Parties Media</p>
<p>1.2 Conduct awareness programmes targeting both female and male students in schools, highlighting the right to ensure equal opportunities for women and men to participate in decision-making. This includes promoting awareness on the importance of ensuring women’s participation in local councils.</p>	<p>Ministry of Education LGA NGOs</p>
<p>1.3 Include an awareness component during electoral campaigning to promote women in leadership in the community.</p>	<p>Political Parties</p>
<p>1.4 Implement measures to increase women in NGO leadership to ensure that the work undertaken with councils is gender-responsive.</p>	<p>NGOs</p>

Recommended Actions	Stakeholders
2. Women	
<p>2.1 Implement programmes targeting women to motivate and empower women to contest for elected positions, especially leadership roles such as council president, vice president, mayor or deputy mayor.</p>	<p>LGA Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSFD) NGOs</p>
<p>2.2 Conduct more discussion forums for women to build confidence to speak and share their opinions. These programmes will enable women to showcase their capacity to the community.</p>	<p>LGA MSFD NGOs</p>
<p>2.3 Implement training programmes geared towards the younger generation to inspire young women to contest for elected positions.</p>	<p>LGA MSFD Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Information & Arts NGOs</p>
<p>2.4 Amplify programmes to prevent and address violence against women to enable women to participate in public life.</p>	<p>MSFD Family Protection Authority NGOs</p>
<p>2.5 Introduce party quotas that ensure 50% of the candidates contesting for councils are women.</p>	<p>Political parties Elections Commission (EC)</p>

<p>2.6 Establish quotas for women in leadership positions of political parties.</p>	<p>Political parties</p>
<p>2.7 Provide training programmes for female candidates to help them undertake successful campaigns and prepare them for the council position.</p>	<p>Political parties NGOs</p>
<p>2.8 Introduce programmes to foster respect towards women and prevent harassment targeted at female candidates from party members.</p>	<p>Political parties</p>
<p>2.9 Establish effective grievance redress mechanisms that are accessible for women when incidences of harassment and other forms of violence arise.</p>	<p>Political parties</p>

Recommended Actions	Stakeholders
3. PWDs	
<p>3.1 Implement programmes to encourage PWDs to contest for elected positions. This also includes programmes where PWDs can gain confidence to share their opinions on public platforms.</p>	<p>MSFD Political parties OPDs NGOs</p>
<p>3.2 Conduct voter education targeting the disability community to increase voter turnout and enhance the autonomy of vote for elections.</p>	<p>EC OPDs NGOs</p>
<p>3.3 Include a minimum of one member on LGA's board to represent the disability community.</p>	<p>LGA Ministry of Cities, Local Government and Public Works (MoCLP) OPDs</p>
<p>3.4 Introduce mechanisms to ensure the inclusion of PWDs in the planning and implementation of the council's programmes. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making council premises and public spaces accessible. • Encouraging PWDs to participate in town hall meetings and other programmes. • Ensuring the meaningful participation of PWDs in committees formed by the council. • Conducting events that are targeted specifically for PWDs. • Build the capacity of councils to improve their skills to conduct public consultations and involve their island community in development, particularly focusing on ensuring the participation of marginalised groups such as PWDs. 	<p>Councils LGA MoCLP</p>
<p>3.5 Train more people to become sign language interpreters to remove the communication barrier for the deaf community to engage in town hall meetings and work with the councils on the planning and implementation of projects.</p>	<p>Councils MSFD NGOs OPDs</p>
<p>3.6 Conduct sessions targeting the community to promote awareness regarding PWDs.</p>	<p>MSFD Councils NGOs OPDs</p>

Recommended Actions	Stakeholders
4. Council	
<p>4.1 Amend rules of procedure for local councils to establish a system that enables female council members and/or WDCs to participate in atoll council meetings. This was recommended as an immediate solution to address the extremely limited representation of women in atoll council’s meetings without substantial legislative amendments.</p>	<p>LGA Relevant government ministries</p>
<p>4.2 Increase the number of training programmes and forums targeting council members. These programmes need to ensure the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both female and male council members should be able to join since most members are elected for the first time and need training opportunities to build the capacity of the entire council. • Organisers should ensure that an equal number of women and men join each programme. • Include opportunities for female council members to participate in training programmes and forums, instead of just the council president. • Increase opportunities for more islands in each atoll to participate in training and forums. • Need extensive training that covers a wide range of topics, particularly on gender equality and women’s empowerment, the Gender Equality Act, addressing social issues, governing a council and fostering a positive relationship with the community. • Increase the number of experience-sharing platforms between councils. • Implement forums to discuss issues where the council president and Secretary General also attend alongside female council members. • Conduct programmes to provide the skills to improve the relationship between councils and WDCs. 	<p>LGA MSFD NGOs</p>

<p>4.3 Establish more robust measures to prevent corruption and hold councils accountable. This also includes mechanisms to prevent retaliation against whistleblowers (such as female council members working to stop corrupt practices).</p>	<p>LGA Anti-Corruption Commission</p>
<p>4.4 Effective implementation of the regulations formulated under the Gender Equality Act and the Prevention of Sexual Abuse and Harassment Act.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is to ensure the establishment or strengthening of gender equality committees and sexual harassment prevention committees within councils as mandated by these regulations. • The committees are necessary to formulate policies to prevent workplace harassment, including effective grievance redress mechanisms and address gender-based discriminatory practices in the workplace environment. 	<p>Councils MSFD</p>
<p>4.5 Introduce family-friendly policies such as the flexibility to undertake childcare responsibilities, in local councils.</p>	<p>LGA Councils</p>

Recommended Actions	Stakeholders
5. State	
<p>5.1 Introduce temporary special measures to ensure women’s equal participation in the parliament.</p>	<p>People’s Majlis Relevant government agencies</p>
<p>5.2 Increase the number of women in high-ranking positions in government agencies such as the government’s cabinet, board members of LGA, state-owned enterprises, etc. Commitment to gender equality needs to be reflected at the top level.</p>	<p>President’s Office All government agencies</p>
<p>5.3 Promote awareness among staff of government agencies including those in senior positions, to increase acceptance of female council members.</p>	<p>All government agencies</p>

CONCLUSION

The assessment report provides an overview of the current context of gender equality in the political sphere in the Maldives with a greater focus on local governance. It also highlights some of the key issues that women, especially those with intersecting vulnerabilities, face in participating in decision-making despite the implementation of a temporary special measure that ensures women's representation in local councils. Results of past assessments and the stakeholder consultations demonstrate the importance of determining local solutions to the specific challenges emerging in the Maldivian context. The assessment then utilised a mixed-methods methodology to understand the experiences of female councillors and identified critical policy and programmatic interventions to create an enabling environment that ensures women's meaningful participation in local governance.

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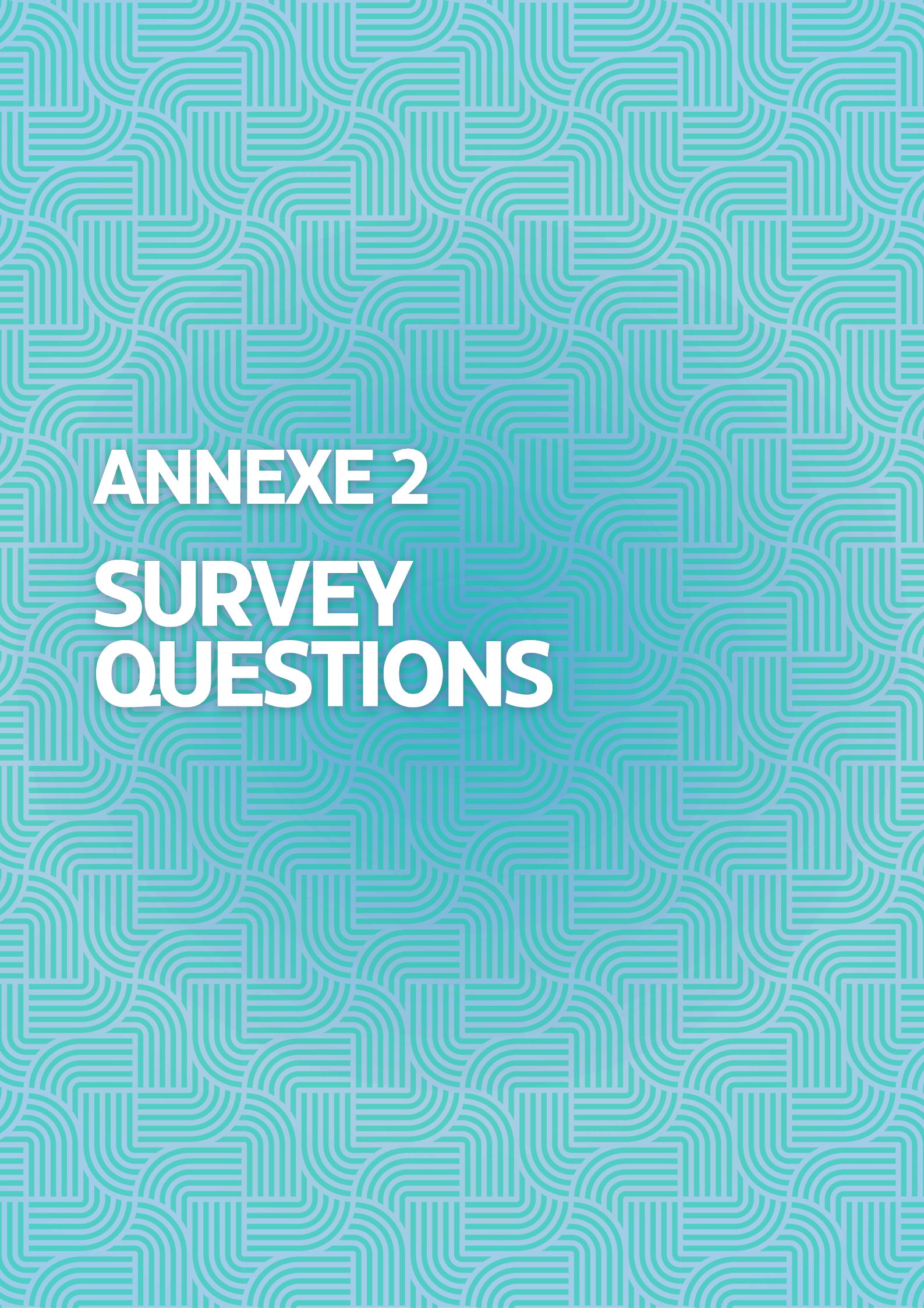
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ANNEXE 1

**PARTICIPANT &
STAKEHOLDER
LIST**

Participants	Data Collection Method
199 Female councillors as survey respondents 39 FGD participants 20 Forum participants	Survey questionnaire and FGD
5 Male councillors (island council, city council and atoll council)	Key informant interviews
Stakeholders:	Data Collection Method
7 members of Women's Development Committees (4 representing islands with population sizes below 1000 and 3 representing islands of city status)	FGD
Local Government Authority	Key informant interviews
President's Office (Policy Office)	Key informant interviews
Ministry of Social and Family Development	Key informant interviews
Ministry of Housing, Land and Urban Development (Planning Section)	Key informant interviews
National Disaster Management Authority	Key informant interviews
International Republican Institution	Key informant interviews
Transparency Maldives	Key informant interviews
Community Development Initiatives	Key informant interviews
Hope for Women	Key informant interviews
Women in Democracy	Key informant interviews
Blind and Visually Impaired Society of Maldives (BVISM)	Key informant interviews
Maldives Association of Persons with Disabilities (MAPD)	Key informant interviews
Maldives Deaf Association (MDA)	Key informant interviews



ANNEXE 2
SURVEY
QUESTIONS

Survey Questionnaire

1	Age:	1 رَدَدُ:
2	Gender: Female/Male	2 جِنْسُ: رَبْرَبُ / رِبْرِبُ
3	Do you identify as a person with a disability? Yes/No	3 هَلْ تَعْتَبِرُ نَفْسَكَ بِشَخْصٍ مُعْتَقِبٍ لِمُعْتَقِبٍ؟ نَعْ / لا
4	If yes, what type of disability? a. Physical disability b. Visual disability c. Hearing disability d. Intellectual disability	4 هَلْ تَعْتَبِرُ نَفْسَكَ بِشَخْصٍ مُعْتَقِبٍ لِمُعْتَقِبٍ؟ هَلْ هُوَ مُعْتَقِبٌ لِمُعْتَقِبٍ؟ ر. جِسْمِي س. بَصَرِي ع. سَمْعِي ح. عَقْلِي
5	In which of these broad regions do you work as a councillor? a. Northern atolls – Ha, HDh, Sh, N, R, B b. Male’ and nearby atolls – Lh, K, AA, Adh, V c. Central atolls – M, F, Dh, Th, L d. Southern Atolls – Ga, GDh, Gn, S	5 هَلْ تَعْمَلُ كَمُجْتَمِعٍ فِي وَاحِدٍ مِنْ هَذِهِ الْمَنَاطِقِ الْوَعِيدَةِ؟ ر. اَلشَّرْقِيَّةُ س. اَلشَّرْقِيَّةُ وَجُنُوبُهَا ع. اَلْمُتَوَسِّطَةُ ح. اَلجَنُوبِيَّةُ
6	Please select the option that most accurately represents your opinion: Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree	6 يَسُرُّكَ اِسْتِخْرَاجُ نِسَاءٍ كَثِيرَةٍ لِمُجْتَمَعِ اَلْمَنْطِقَةِ لَا اُتَّفِقُ عَلَيْهِ اُتَّفِقُ عَلَيْهِ قَلِيلًا اُتَّفِقُ عَلَيْهِ كَثِيرًا اُتَّفِقُ عَلَيْهِ كَثِيرًا اُتَّفِقُ عَلَيْهِ كَثِيرًا
a	I believe that women can play a significant role in undertaking the work of the local councils.	ر يُؤْمِنُ بِاَنَّ نِسَاءً كَثِيرَةً يُمْكِنُ لَهُنَّ اَلْعَمَلُ فِي اَلْمَنْطِقَةِ
b	The 33% quota for women in the local councils made it possible for me to become elected as a councillor.	س اَلنَّسَبَةُ اَلْمُتَعَدِّدَةُ لِنِسَاءٍ فِي اَلْمَنْطِقَةِ (33%) جَعَلَتْهُنَّ يُمْكِنُ لِي اَلْعَمَلُ فِي اَلْمَنْطِقَةِ
c	I received ample support from my political party when I was campaigning for the local council (respond only if you belong to a political party).	س اَلْحُزْبُ اَلْوَحِيدُ اَلَّذِي اَنَا فِيهِ اَتَمَّ اَلدَّعْوَى لِي اَلْعَمَلُ فِي اَلْمَنْطِقَةِ



ANNEXE 3

**FGD QUESTIONS
(ONLINE)**

Step 1: Outcome Harvesting (7 minutes)

- The online FGDs will be held in groups of a maximum of six participants.
- Write down in the chat or unmute and share a change that you have observed since the quota was introduced and an increased number of women were elected to the local councils (negative or positive).
- These could be changes observed within the political parties, how the councils operate, the activities being implemented by the councils, any difference in the community, such as common practices or economy, the community's perception towards women and girls, changes within their own families, etc.
- Please share at least one change per person.

Step 2: Semi-structured questions (1 hour)

1. What was your experience contesting for the Local Council Election in 2021?
 - a. What kind of support did you get from the political parties?
 - b. What kind of support did you get from your family?
 - c. What kind of support did you get from the community?
 - d. How were you able to access financial resources?
 - e. If you contested in a previous year, did you notice any change? What were they?
2. I would like to talk about your experience working in the council since you were elected.
 - a. What are the roles/tasks that you usually undertake?
 - b. What are the roles/tasks that male councillors usually undertake?
 - c. How do you decide the type of initiatives to implement? Who decides?
 - d. How do you undertake your budget planning? Who decides?
 - e. What challenges do you face daily in the council?
 - f. Probe areas that were mentioned during the forum such as:
 - i. Discrimination in the work environment.
 - ii. Tasks assigned for only certain sectors.
 - iii. Difficulties in working with the Secretary-General or council staff.
 - iv. Harassment.
 - v. Assigning burdensome work.
 - vi. Not being able to participate in decision-making, especially with financial implications.
 - vii. Scepticism towards their capability and capacity to contribute.
 - viii. Opportunity to participate in training.

3. Have you worked with any persons with disabilities as part of your council work?
 - a. How do you ensure the inclusion of PWDs in the work that you do?
4. What does your island community think about having a female councillor?
 - a. Probe areas that were mentioned during the forum such as:
 - i. Stereotypical gender roles of what women can do.
 - ii. Harassment.
 - iii. Using religion to justify women's exclusion.
 - iv. Family responsibilities.
5. How does your family perceive you in your new role?
 - a. Do you have to juggle household responsibilities and council work?
 - b. If yes, what challenges do you face trying to juggle family life and council work?
6. Why do you think these challenges exist?
7. In your opinion, do you think the quota addresses any of these challenges?
 - a. If yes/no, why?
8. What do you think needs to be done differently?
 - a. What can the government do?
 - b. What can political parties do?
 - c. What can LGA do?
 - d. What can NGOs do?
 - e. Are there any other stakeholders on the island that have a role they can play? What can they do?



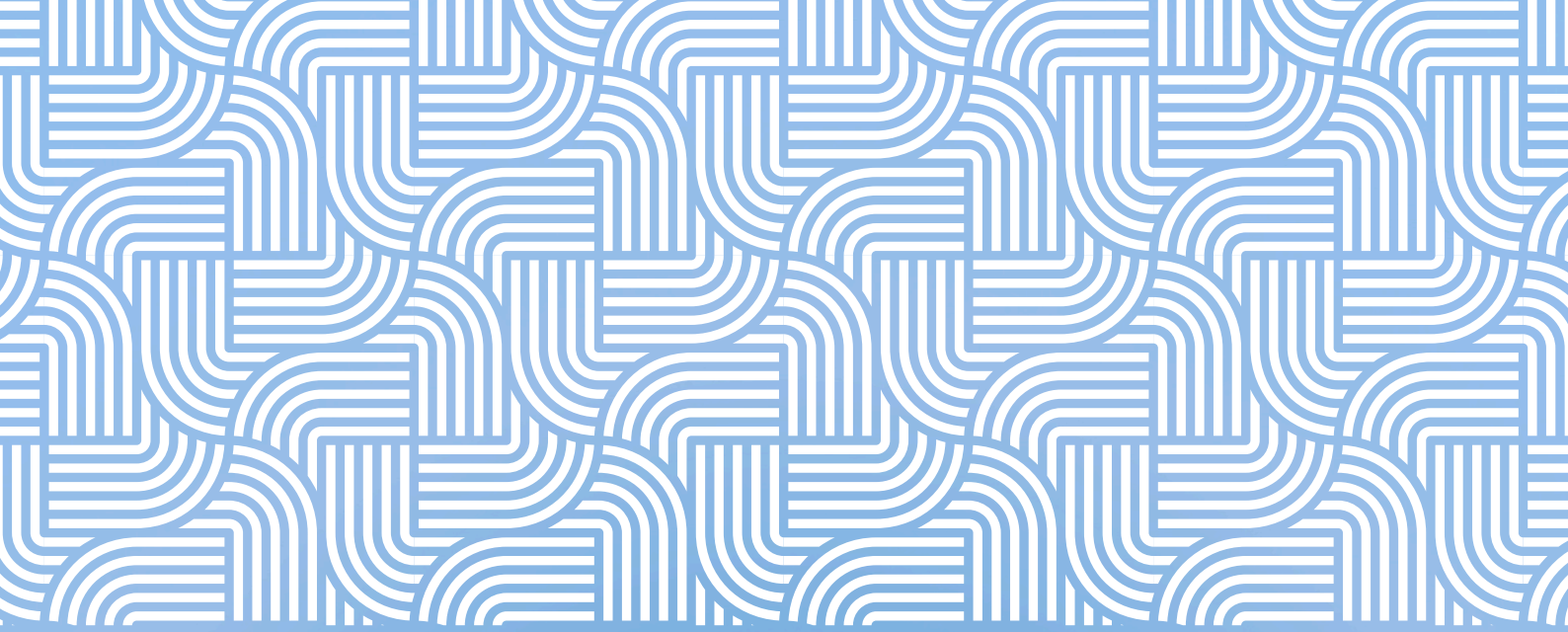
ANNEXE 4

**KEY INFORMANT
INTERVIEW
QUESTIONS**

The questions will be adjusted based on the stakeholders.

1. In what capacity has your organization engaged with the councils in the past?
2. What has been your experience working with local councils?
 - a. Who do you coordinate with?
 - b. What are the roles/tasks that female councillors usually undertake?
 - c. What are the roles/tasks that male councillors usually undertake?
3. How much does your work involve collaboration with female councillors?
4. What specific approaches does your organization adopt to ensure the participation of female councillors?
 - a. Is there any data collected on the level of participation of female councillors?
5. What mechanisms does your organisation follow to ensure that decision-making processes consider the perspectives and opinions of both male and female councillors?
6. In your work with the local councils, have you worked with any persons with disabilities as part of the council or advisory committee to the council (especially female)?
 - a. If yes, what was your experience working with them? What type of roles/tasks did they undertake?
 - b. What type of initiatives were undertaken?
7. A 33% quota to ensure women's participation in local councils was implemented in 2021, what do you think are the existing barriers for women and other vulnerable groups to participate in politics?
8. What do you think has been the impact of increased women's participation in local governance and community development?

9. Do you think the 33% quota has achieved its desired outcomes?
 - a. If yes or no, why?
 - b. What needs to change?
10. In your opinion, are there any barriers for female councillors to engage in the work undertaken by the councils? If yes, what are they?
 - a. How much is women's participation in councils translating to influence in decision-making processes within the councils?
11. (Question for stakeholders other than LGA) What are specific areas or initiatives where LGA has worked collaboratively with your organisation to promote the participation of women councillors?
12. (Question specifically for LGA) What are the formal mechanisms in place for a female councillor to lodge a complaint if facing any discrimination or challenges in carrying out her responsibilities?



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