

Salutations

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak at this event today. I am immensely honoured.

Firstly, let me wish you all a very happy international women's day. In a world of uncertainties, there are some things we can be certain of – and this year's women's day theme encapsulates it perfectly - 'Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow'. It is a certainty that closing the gap on gender equality leads to more sustainable outcomes. It is a certainty that to lead secure, healthy dignified lives, we must shift to more sustainable and resilient paths of development. It is a certainty that we must urgently do both.

In my address today I have been asked to reflect a little on my own experiences. I come from the Maldives, and fully acknowledge my privilege in belonging to a family who have always supported my wishes – personally and professionally. It is a privilege to have the financial means and the social solidarity to pursue my passions, and it is a direct advantage when facing systematic gender-based challenges. Systemic challenges include misogyny, sexual harassment in especially male dominated workplaces, and cultural values that have been used to justify gendered roles.

Resilience is a word I often use in my work, especially in relation to the Maldives' ability to withstand the worst impacts of the climate crisis. In this context, it can come across as an abstract, technical word associated with coastal protection, and rising sea levels. But where I've learned the true meaning of resilience is through the women I have been fortunate to grow up with and work with.

Women like my maternal grandmother, who married at a very young age, had ten children, of whom 7 survived, worked hard to support her family and the wider community with home based businesses, amidst great political upheaval, and now perseveres through multiple mental health challenges. Or my mother who had a thriving career in the foreign service which she gave up to become the primary caregiver for a child with special needs, moving away from her immediate support networks to search the world for treatments that were not yet available in the Maldives, and now to my colleagues, young working mothers, who perform the daily juggling act of leading and formulating climate policy in what is still a very patriarchal system, while attending international conferences, remote working and figuring out how to wean our babies. My grandmother had a whole network of

extended family members, strong matriarchs, in laws and cousins, to help her navigate her life. I have all this, plus a whatsapp group – ‘The Pregnancy Advisory Group’! Resilience is the thread that runs through. Resilience is community, collaboration, advocates for progressive policies, and most importantly support to be able to adapt to whatever comes our way.

For this type of support to be universal and sustainable, there must be great structural change. Crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the impacts of climate change expose and intensify the structural injustices inherent in our systems. Across the world, and especially in the Global South, this impact is unfortunately felt most by women. In our part of the world, we face simultaneous challenges of ensuring access to basic services and fulfilment of developmental needs, while also ensuring these solutions are climate progressive and sustainable. We now know, and it has been highlighted extensively in the recent IPCC report on adaptation, that for an initiative or a community to be climate resilient or sustainable, requires it to be gender inclusive.

The Maldives has made great strides in achieving gender parity when it comes to education and the health sectors, and women do make up a significant part of the workforce, especially in the public sector, but there is a distinct gender gap in leadership and management levels. We are now working to ensure greater gender equality in decision making, legislation, and climate policy formulation. Our Gender Equality Plan attempts to rectify and reform some of these issues. When we discussed these issues at a recent internal meeting, someone commented that a lot of these reforms – such as gender quotas in various branches of the state - seemed very top down. Its true, it is. That is however the nature of the beast. Without the active appointment of women into leadership roles or mandated quotas, progress for gender equality has been slow and stagnant.

But times are changing, today’s generation in the Maldives demand more equality, they rightfully question the representative value of an all male panel, they are vocal about the lack of support systems around to enable young families, and especially working mothers to remain in the work place. With greater migration into urban settings, constrained living spaces and an inability to rely on traditional extended family networks, they demand systemic support such as flexible working, child care facilities in workplaces, and more concerted action towards misogyny and sexual harassment. These conversations are important and necessary for us to change, and it has led to active policy shifts.

For the first time in the history of the Maldives we now have women justices in the Supreme Court, and aim to increase the composition of women in the judiciary to 15% from its current 9%. We have introduced 6 months of paid maternity leave and 1 month paid paternity leave. I was lucky enough to be one of the first beneficiaries of this policy. In April 2021, the Maldives held local council elections under the amended Decentralisation Act, which ensures that women make up 1/3 of the newly elected councils. 388 women councillors were elected last year. Along with greater financial independence and an increase in budget for the councils and their Women's Development Committees, the number of women now in leadership and policy roles especially at a local government level has certainly increased. We would also like to set targets for at least 30% of the candidates funded by the political parties to be female and to increase the participation of women in political party governance to at least 40%.

The hope is that with more women around the table, there will be a more accurate reflection of the issues facing local communities which is then translated to more practical, progressive, and sustainable policy. But the election alone isn't enough. There is a recognition that traditional cultural or social ideas about gender pervade so heavily that in certain circumstances it has meant a limitation in the roles of these newly elected women councillors into very traditional gendered activities. A more concerted effort to raise awareness, increase the technical capacity of newly elected councillors, assistance with the formulation of work plans and land use plans are being implemented to overcome these challenges.

Rising emissions and the impact of global heating is not an abstract scenario, but one that already directly and disproportionately impacts women. With an increase in the number of disasters that we have to respond to – floods, water contamination, storm surges – it is mostly women, and their livelihoods that are most frequently affected. In the Maldives and in many other developing countries, women are at the centre of home based economic activities – small scale agriculture, fish processing – and with every flood, or climate crisis related impact, such as ocean acidification or migration of fish stocks, it is these activities that get disrupted. What we have found difficult to do so far is the assessment of these economic losses. It is easier to value damage to hard infrastructure and furniture, but more challenging to value loss of crops and home based economic activity, especially in a context where there is an unfamiliarity in providing the level of data needed for compensation schemes. Perhaps we need to change the way we formulate our questions? Or be flexible in the way we interact and engage with communities? Newly elected women's development committee

members' opinions on waste management, disaster risk reduction, and boosting economic activity is vital to building resilient communities.

Some of the other policies we are implementing are to do with programs to create more awareness on DRR, which include assisting local communities to initiate basic emergency measures without waiting for the arrival of frontline responders, or tactics to increase the resilience of homes and properties against floods. The establishment of water and sanitation systems on all inhabited islands is a primary pledge of this administration, and one that we hope to complete by next year. Ensuring access to piped, safe water and proper sanitation systems is adaptation to climate change, and it also serves to decrease the burden on women – in terms of health and hygiene, for home based economic activity and wider caregiving roles.

Ongoing projects on expanding renewable energy in the Maldives include a comprehensive gender component, which call for the active recruitment of women - especially in the outer islands – to more technical roles. As a result, State Owned Utility company Fenaka have gone from having 1 woman in a technical role to 8 women in technical roles. The project aims to work closely with Development Committees to overcome certain traditional values about what jobs are suitable for women, and the economic and social benefit of renewable energy to the islands.

A lot of our progress in advancing gender equality depends on the greater visibility of women in these roles. Women are often portrayed as the backbone, the foundation of economies and communities, but that has also allowed an inaccurate valuation of their contributions – economically and socially. It is important to hear the stories of the people who are our support systems, who perform the greatest amount of unpaid care work. It is important to see gender equality amongst our leadership, legislature, and administrative branches.

I'm proud to have been part of a delegation to COP26 that was female led and included mostly women negotiators. I'm proud that our Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Technology, Minister Shauna, was appointed by the COP Presidency as a co-chair to facilitate the negotiations on adaptation, and specifically the Global Goal on Adaptation. The gender compositions at COPs have improved but there is a lot more we can do. In the Maldives we want to be in a position where we can recruit more negotiators to our delegation, and to specifically address gender equality and youth representation through these appointments. To do so we need access to resources that allow us to train negotiators in the technicalities of climate

discussions and support them to travel and participate in international climate conferences to build up their experience.

Before I conclude, I'd like to touch on a weakness in our systems. The gender data gap. Not having access to timely data, and especially sex disaggregated data is a significant disadvantage in policy making. We have begun implementing some excellent policies in the Maldives – introduction of a minimum wage, commitment to Net Zero emissions by 2030, expansion of protected areas, increase in salaries for the education sector, a free first-degree program, access to loans for higher education, to name a few, but we haven't been able to properly analyse the impact of these policies through a gender lens.

For instance, the majority of graduates are women, but what are the challenges they face in securing employment or being appointed to managerial or leadership positions. Why aren't more women contesting for the Parliament? The tourism sector is our predominant industry, but only 12% of resort workers are women, and of this a very small minority is made up of Maldivian women. How can we work around cultural biases and offer structural solutions like greater flexibility, and security to attract women into these roles? Are we counting the number of women in the support roles of the tourism industry – aviation, marketing, food and beverage, water sports? We know that access to data that is gender inclusive allows the better honing of policies, stronger communication on wider benefits to women and society and a shift in mindsets where gender must be mainstreamed into all social and political considerations.

The need to value women's voices and incorporate gender considerations into our national and international programs is one that requires a constant and consistent effort. The Maldives is on the frontlines of the climate crisis. There are certainties that we have to embrace. Without a drastic reduction of global carbon emissions to limit global temperature rise to 1.5C, our lives and livelihoods face an existential crisis. We have to adapt to a heating planet, and we cannot do it without the full inclusion of the most resilient among us. Gender inclusivity, gender equality must not be a sidenote, or an annual celebration, but something that is ingrained into everything we do.

Thank You