



MMWM WEBINAR
SERIES

Call to #EndHumanTrafficking in the Maldives

A multi-stakeholder panel discussion 30/08/21

2021



WORLD DAY AGAINST
**TRAFFICKING
IN PERSONS**
30 JULY

Organised by Mission for Migrant Workers Maldives for World Day against
Trafficking in Persons

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The report is based on the webinar conducted on 30th August 2021 in conjunction with the World Day Against Trafficking in Person 2021 in collaboration with the Anti-Trafficking in Person Office (Ministry of Defence Maldives) and International Organization for Migration (IOM).

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Publisher: Mission for Migrant Workers Maldives (MMWM)

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ABSTRACT

Moderated by the organization's Co-Founder and Vice President, Dr. Adeel Shareef, the seminar started off with a brief description of the organization's core values and how they partnered with corporates along the lines of Ooredoo and MV+ to conduct various campaigns promoting the wellbeing of migrant workers in the Maldives.

On the occasion of World Day against Trafficking in Persons (July 30th), this webinar's main purpose is to strengthen partnership and cooperation between stakeholders and promote open dialogue on the actions required to end human trafficking in the Maldives.

On the panel were seven individuals representing organizations that are actively working for this cause. The discussion started with each member of the panel giving a brief description on their organization's stance and work on the matter and was followed up by a series of questions that had been collected from the public.

PANEL MEMBERS



Dr. Adeel Shareef
(Moderator)

Co-Founder and Vice President
Mission for Migrant Workers
Maldives



Jaishan Amir

Director
Anti-Trafficking in Person (Anti-TIP)
Office Ministry of Defence



Mariyam Nazima

Deputy Minister
Ministry of Economic
Development



Ashfaq Fikree

Immigration Officer
Maldives Immigration



Mohamed Nasir

General Member
Maldivian Red Crescent, Male'
Branch



Aasavri Rai

Support Officer
Regional Migrant Protection Unit
International Organization for
Migration



Ahmed Yamaany

Director of Research and Monitoring
Human Rights Commission of Maldives



Shaziya Ali

Grants and Outreach Manager
Transparency Maldives

ABBREVIATIONS

MMWM – Mission for Migrant Workers Maldives
MED – Ministry of Economic Development
HRCM - Human Rights Commission of the Maldives
IOM - International Organization for Migration
MRC – Maldivian Red Crescent
TM – Transparency Maldives
MI – Maldives Immigration

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If exploitation is involved, it's a case of human trafficking

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Jaishan Amir
Director
Anti-trafficking in Persons Office (Anti-TIP)
Ministry of Defence



HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN THE MALDIVES

a. Human trafficking as per the Prevention of Human Trafficking Act (PHTA)

Ratified in September 2013, the Prevent of Human Trafficking Act defines human trafficking as per below:

"Committing any of the following acts by means of threat or use of force or through deception or fraud or by abuse of power or a person's position of vulnerability and disability or by giving money or any other benefits or using any unlawful coercion with the purpose of exploitation."

Meanwhile, exploitation can be anything from the provision of labour or services, an agreement which creates illegal obligations, forced marriage, withholding or destruction of a person's identification or travel documents, creating a debt-bondage relationship, forcing a person to commit or be an accomplice to a sexual act, forcing a person into prostitution, removal of persons organs, or any other such acts.

b. History of migrant workers and human trafficking in the Maldives

Maldives has been receiving migrant workers since the early 1980s, when sectors such as tourism and construction began to require more manpower that the country's population could not compensate for. As these sectors require mostly manual labour, a large proportion of migrant worker population are unskilled and low-paid workers.

As Ms. Mariyam Nazima from MED stated, as the economy grows, it is inevitable that the number of migrant workers would also increase. Many of these workers are undocumented and are more susceptible to being taken advantage of by the employers.

Inhumane treatment of migrant workers in the form of poor working and living conditions; non-payment of wages has been rampant in the Maldives. She noted this to be most prevalent in the construction sector, although Mr. Mohamed Nasir from MRC also noted boat building and domestic work as industries where trafficked persons are mainly employed.

Mr. Ashfaq Fikree from MI stated that human trafficking became more of an issue since 2009, when there was a large influx of migrant workers into the Maldives. It was highlighted that some migrant workers only realize they are victims of human trafficking after they arrive to the Maldives. In such cases, they arrive with little to no information on their employers and have been scammed by third party agents that facilitated their entry into the country. This issue was taken up by Mr. Mohamed Nasir, a general member of MRC, and an expatriate worker himself. He emphasized the loneliness and vulnerability that victims in those situations feel and how important it is that they receive help from local authorities.

Human trafficking of migrant workers is an issue that has been widely circulating among the Maldivian community, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic when a few notable cases were publicized.

The public's interest and general sentiment regarding such issues prove that all relevant authorities and parties involved in the elimination of human trafficking need to promote open dialogue and transparency in their efforts, as well as to improve any existing frameworks.

c. Government's action in eliminating human trafficking

A frequently asked question among the public is that of how trafficked people are overlooked by the country's immigration system. According to Mr. Ashfaq Fikree, this happened due to the un-regulation of the labour migration

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We are working with the Ministry of Defense to address human trafficking in the Maldives along with IOM and other relevant institutions.

Ashfaq Fikry
Immigration Officer
Maldives Immigration



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system and the overwhelming number of migrant workers around the time this issue started, which he confirmed to be in the year, 2009.

The main sentiment reiterated by members of the panel is that this is an issue that has been neglected for many years and that previous governments failed to implement existing laws and regulations against trafficking. However, working against human trafficking is one of the key components of the current government's mandate and they are working with key international stakeholders on this matter.

According to Mr. Jaishan Amir, Director at Anti-trafficking in persons office at the Ministry of Defense, the authority mandated to work against human trafficking along with Maldives Immigration, key initiatives have been launched and are underway. One such initiative is the Anti Human Trafficking agenda released in December 2019.

He also noted the fact that Maldives got upgraded to Tier 2 on the United States of America, State Departments Trafficking in Persons Report 2021. This point was also highlighted by Ms. Aasavri Rai, Support Officer at Regional Migrant Protection Unit at IOM, who congratulated the Maldivian government and civil society for their success despite the obstacles posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. She also commended the MED's efforts in regularizing undocumented migrant worker situations and including them in Covid-19 vaccination efforts.

Other noteworthy undertakings include the establishment of a victim shelter in Gulhifalhu Island, Kaafu Atoll, as well as recent amendments made to the anti-human trafficking act in the form of specific provisions for anti-trafficking of children.

VICTIM SUPPORT

a. Education on rights

Panelists of this webinar highlighted the importance of victims of human trafficking and migrant workers in general being aware of the rights they are entitled to in our society. On this note, Mr. Ahmed Yamaany, Director of Research and Monitoring at HRCM, noted that language barriers between authorities and victims are a recurring obstacle and emphasized the importance of victims receiving information that is accessible and easy for them to understand. He further stated that all authorities need to have translators and interpreters when communicating with migrant workers.

During this webinar, representatives from HRCM and TM, explained how they work towards educating migrant workers on their rights by providing information cards and pamphlets that are in a variety of foreign languages. The main objective of such materials are to educate victims on their rights and protections granted to them under the existing laws, regulations including Anti-Trafficking Act as well as to point them to relevant authorities and service providers that may be of assistance.

It was highlighted that TM had worked during the Covid-19 pandemic to provide updates on the situation to migrant workers via social media campaigns and Facebook through live sessions.

b. Psychosocial services and legal aid

The importance of providing victims of human trafficking with safe accommodation, medical treatment, and private and confidential counselling was highlighted by Mr. Ahmed Yamaany from HRCM during this session. He stated that HRCM has been providing free legal aid to such victims, as well as operating a hotline that runs 24/7. Such legal aid is also noted to be provided by TM.

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Human trafficking in the Maldives is a problem that needs urgent action – we need to end the culture of inhumane acts in this community.

Shaziya Ali
Grants and Outreach Manager
Transparency Maldives



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PUBLIC AWARENESS

a. Education on human trafficking and assisting victims

Mr. Mohamed Nasir from MRC stressed on the importance of members of the public treating victims of human trafficking with compassion instead labelling them as criminals. He also emphasized the importance of empathizing with their situation. During this discussion, it was acknowledged that xenophobia is rampant within the Maldivian community and that challenging such beliefs is of utmost importance.



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It's important to make sure that victims aren't pointed to as criminals

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*Mohamed Nasir
General Member
Maldivian Red Crescent, Male' Branch*

Mr. Mohamed Jaishan explained that many members of the public are unclear on who victims of human trafficking really are and that they often get confused as undocumented migrant workers. Other members of the panel also noted the importance of educating members of the community and employers on identifying victims of human trafficking and how to help them.

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One primary challenge is the community not responding to efforts to bring undocumented workers back into the system.

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Mariyam Nazima

Deputy Minister

Ministry of Economic Development.



RECOMMENDATIONS

a. Promoting cooperation between key local and international stakeholders

Cooperation and dialogue between international organizations in combating human trafficking is said to be only a recent development in Maldives and has been given special priority by the current government. It is of paramount importance that relevant international stakeholders be included in the effort to prevent human trafficking in the Maldives. On this note, Ms. Aasavri Rai noted the organization's efforts in training community organizations to identify potential victims of trafficking as well working towards the establishment of a migrant resource centre that would act as a one stop solution for all services related to migrants. She further stated the importance of international cooperation in this problem, as bilateral agreements are required to help victims of trafficking return to their home countries and sustainably integrate with society instead of falling into the same conditions that resulting in them falling victim to human trafficking.

b. Ensuring perpetrators are held accountable

Ms. Shaziya Ali from TM, labelled corruption as a major factor that has contributed to the trafficking of persons situation in the Maldives. She highlighted that people from the public as well as companies need to be encouraged to report such actions instead of fearing what they may face from the perpetrators. TM is currently said to be working on the implementation of a law that ensures the protection of whistle-blowers.

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IOM's framework addresses issues at both individual community and structural levels.

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*Aasavri Rai
Support Officer
Regional Migrant Protection Unit
International Organization for Migration*



c. Monitoring the actions of parties involved in human trafficking

Mr. Yamaany explained that monitoring the actions of relevant authorities and employers is an important part of the country's plan against human trafficking. The importance of ensuring migrant workers receive their income in a timely manner was also highlighted as many human trafficking cases are related to non-payment of wages. He noted that the National Preventive Mechanism included conducting regular visits to migrant worker housing quarters to monitor their conditions.

Ms. Aasavri Rai from IOM recommended that the private sector should be regulated by issuing licenses for ethical recruitment of migrant workers. It was highlighted by Ms. Mariyam Nazima that changes have been brought to the regulations involving recruitment. It is currently mandated that, before arriving in the Maldives, all migrant workers should have received a Letter of Appointment stating their salary, workplace, and the duration of their term.

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We need to promote a culture of prevention rather than retribution.

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Ahmed Yamaany
Director of Research and Monitoring
Human Rights Commission of Maldives



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