



MMWM WEBINAR  
SERIES

# #BreakTheBias

Issues faced by women migrant workers  
in the Maldives and future prospects

2022



International  
Women's Day

# STENZOO

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The report is based on the webinar conducted on 10th March 2022 in conjunction with the International Womens Day 2022 in partnership with World Health Organisation (WHO).

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**Author:** Niha Waseem

**Editorial Team:** Dr. Minah Faiz Rashad  
Ijaz Waheed

**Layout and Design:** Mohamed Eeman Ahmed

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# ABSTRACT

Dr. Adeel Shareef, Co-Founder and Vice President of MMWM began the webinar with a brief description of MMWM and 2022's theme for International Women's Day, "Break the Bias", which focuses on creating a world free of bias, stereotypes, and discrimination against women.

This webinar's main objective was to promote open dialogue and create public awareness regarding the issues faced by women migrant workers in the Maldives, as well as to suggest recommendations and future directions that can assist in upholding and protecting the rights of women migrant workers, irrespective of their sector of work or nationality.

The panel consisted of individuals representing state institutions and non-governmental organizations doing relevant work as well as an individual representing women migrant workers of the Maldives. The discussion started with each member of the panel giving a brief description of their organization's work on the matter which was then followed up by a series of questions that had been collected from the audience.

# PANEL MEMBERS



**Dr. Adeel Shareef**  
**(Moderator)**

Co-Founder and Vice President  
Mission for Migrant Workers  
Maldives



**Aminath Shirani Naeem**

Deputy Director-General  
Ministry of Gender, Family and Social  
Services



**Fathimath Himya**

Secretary General  
Maldivian Red Crescent



**Uza. Shafeea Riza**

Co-Founder  
Family Legal Clinic



**Ahmed Anwar**

Chairperson  
Hope for Women



**Dr. Zeba Un Naher**

Assistant Professor  
Maldives National University

# ABBREVIATIONS

MMWM - Mission for Migrant Workers Maldives

MGFSS - Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services

MRC – Maldivian Red Crescent

FLC – Family Legal Clinic

MNU – The Maldives National University

HW – Hope for Women

“

Challenge yourself to reconsider your first impression, let your brain to work more to see what is there inside

”

*Dr. Zeba Un Naher*  
Assistant Professor  
Maldives National University



# WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE MALDIVES

Panelists acknowledged that the population of women migrant workers in the Maldives is relatively low. However, Ms. Fathimath Himya, Secretary-General of MRC, noted that a trend of an increasing number of women migrant workers has been observed over the last few years.

The rich history of contributions made by women migrant workers to the Maldivian society was celebrated throughout this panel discussion. Ms. Aminath Shirani Naeem, Deputy Director-General of MGFSS noted that female expatriates have played an invaluable role in the upbringing of our nation's youth through their roles as educators and enriched our understanding of cultures outside our own. Additionally, the presence of women migrant workers in caregiving roles has enabled the retention of Maldivian women in the labor force. In this discussion, she expressed that she hopes to see more female expatriates in technical roles.

## CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE MALDIVES

### LIMITED ACCESS TO JUSTICE

The number of hurdles a migrant worker would face in accessing justice is more than a Maldivian would face. Uza. Shafeea Riza, co-founder of FLC, shared her experiences with women migrant workers who had come to FLC with cases of domestic violence, sexual violence, and harassment. She noted that the National Social Protection System of Maldives is not accessible nor adaptable to the needs of the women migrant workers. In most cases, the survivors are not provided with suitable advice, nor adequate and timely psychosocial support. As a result, most of the evidence against the perpetrators is lost within the system, which in turn adversely affects the survivors' cases if tried in a court of law.

When questioned on the current options available to female expatriates within the system, submitting formal complaints to (in the case of workers in non-domestic industries) their organization's Human Resources department, Maldives Police Service, and MGFSS are stated as suitable options. Uza. Shafeea Riza stressed the importance of reporting events within 12 months after occurrence and recording incidents in a diary or telling a trusted friend to help maintain a solid narrative of what had occurred. She also advises survivors to contact the Police to help them remove their belongings from their workplace and maintain contact with their respective country's Embassy during the whole process.

## SOLITARY CONFINEMENT AND LACK OF SUPPORT SYSTEM

Ms. Fathimath Himya stated that female expatriates tend to be more dependent on their employers than their male counterparts, especially in the caregiving industry. They often reside in the same place as their employer, are allowed outside only while accompanied by their employer, and have their passports confiscated. Therefore, they have less connection with friends and relatives and are made more vulnerable in dangerous situations.

She also noted that the number of women migrant workers who seek help via MRC's helpline is relatively low. In many cases, the person seeking help would whisper during the call, or abruptly end the line, indicating that they are currently under threat.

“

We could say that modern-day slavery exists in our country

”

*Fathimath Himya*  
Secretary General  
Maldivian Red Crescent



# VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORKPLACE AND PUBLIC

Violence against female expatriates is rampant within the Maldivian society. Ms. Aminath Shirani mentions sexual and physical violence among the main cases related to female expatriates reported to MGFSS, with 22 cases reported since 2020. She states that there currently are no working SOPs or mandates in place that would facilitate the management of survivors in such cases.

“

I call upon the state of Maldives to sign the UN Migrant Workers Convention in order to address the bias and so that Migrant Workers will enjoy their rights fully

”

*Ahmed Anwar*  
Chairperson  
Hope for Women



Dr. Zeba Un Naher, Assistant Professor at MNU, shared personal anecdotes related to the discrimination she faced as a women migrant worker during the discussion. For instance, she mentions an incident in which her status as a doctor from Bangladesh was met with disbelief from some Maldivians. This indicates the existence of prejudice against migrant workers in Maldivian society.

Additionally, she notes that women migrant workers do not receive maternity benefits (maternity leave, flexible working hours, etc.) on the same level as locals, which often forces them to quit their jobs.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## a. Research and data collection

As noted by Mr. Ahmed Anwar, Chairperson of HW, statistics related to the issues women migrant workers face are extremely lacking. Such research and statistics would facilitate the formation of policies that would help women migrant workers. Dr. Zeba Un Naher also stressed the importance of having decentralized data that reflects the true experiences of workers. She also mentions personal experiences with companies that treat their female expatriates well and says that such examples also need to be highlighted.

## b. Ensuring perpetrators are held accountable

A multi-stakeholder effort was noted to be imperative in improving the existing level of facilities available to women migrant workers. For instance, Uza. Shafeea Riza notes that the National Social Protection system in the Maldives needs to have a more collaborative effort with embassies and other relevant organizations to create a more conducive environment for survivors where they fully understand the level of help being available to them.

Ms. Fathimath Himya stressed the importance of ensuring confidentiality and the protection of workers who reach out for help. Workers mustn't be harmed in the process of authorities intervening to help them. She states that we need more mechanisms for them to reach out, such as helplines and anonymous reporting. While they need to be aware of the help available to them, Ms. Fathimath Himya stated that it is relatively difficult to reach female expatriates as many of them are confined to their workplaces. The importance of having safe spaces for women migrant workers outside of their workplaces was reiterated throughout this discussion.

“

Break the biases in language in access to social and health protection systems so that female migrant workers can enjoy their freedom and mental wellbeing while they work to contribute in our community

”

*Aminath Shirani Naeem*

*Deputy Director-General*

*Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services.*



### c. Implementing laws related to migrant workers

Uza. Shafeea Riza stressed the importance of the government ensuring that currently existing laws that protect the rights of women migrant workers are fully implemented in the Maldives. For instance, all workers are required to have a registered employer in the Maldives, but this is often not the case. Additionally, she noted that impunity is often given to certain sectors that have a large women migrant worker base. For example, companies in the tourism industry have had many cases of workplace issues regarding female expatriates but have failed to be held accountable for various reasons.

“

Our commitment to making a society that is safe to all, including women migrant workers, should be stronger than bending to certain influences and biases

”

*Uza. Shafeea Riza*  
Co-Founder  
Family Legal Clinic



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