



## SPEAKING POLITICS:

# Communication, Language, and Women's Participation in Governance in the Maldives

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite constitutional guarantees and incremental efforts to promote gender equality, women remain significantly underrepresented in political decision-making in the Maldives. In recent parliamentary cycles, fewer than five per cent of elected Members of Parliament have been women, with similarly low representation at local governance levels prior to the mandatory 33% quota for women in local council elections. This persistent exclusion generates a democratic and governance deficit, limiting the diversity of perspectives informing law-making and weakening policy responsiveness in areas central to citizens' lived experiences.

This policy paper examines women's political participation through the lens of communication, conceptualised not simply as an individual skill, but as a politically regulated process that shapes who are recognised as legitimate political actors. It distinguishes between communication as expression, women's ability to articulate political ideas through language, public speaking, and digital engagement, and communication as reception, referring to how women's political speech is interpreted, framed, and valued by media, institutions, and society.

Drawing on key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and observational data supplemented by a desk review and targeted media analysis, the research finds that women generally possess strong linguistic abilities in Dhivehi and English whilst demonstrate growing digital literacy. These competencies enable women to engage constituents, navigate institutional environments, and expand political visibility, including through digital engagement that can reduce certain financial and organisational barriers traditionally associated with campaigning. Yet these capacities do not reliably translate into political influence or sustained participation. Barriers related to communication as reception play a more decisive role: women's contributions are frequently judged through gendered frames emphasising appearance, family background, morality, or reputation rather than policy substance or leadership competence, and they are consistently expected to perform to a higher standard than men to achieve credibility.

Both traditional and digital media reproduce these dynamics. Traditional media frequently marginalises women's policy positions through gendered framing, while digital platforms simultaneously expand visibility and expose women to harassment, misinformation, and reputational attacks that carry broader social consequences. Weak enforcement mechanisms of gender neutral legal and regularity protections combined with the absence of institutional safeguards, such as enforceable media guidelines on gender sensitivity or processes to address violence against women in politics, further entrenches these barriers, signalling that women's political voices are undervalued or expendable. These communication-related barriers interact with structural constraints such as limited campaign resources, caregiving

responsibilities, restricted mobility, and entrenched cultural expectations. Moreover, the findings further indicate that communication practices themselves function as governance mechanisms shaping inclusion. Across institutions, gender equality is frequently treated as a supplementary or reactive concern rather than embedded within core political and regulatory processes. As a result, responsibility for navigating participation barriers remains individualised despite structurally unequal conditions.

Thus, the research demonstrates that constraints on women's political participation stem less from deficits in skills or confidence and more significantly from institutional environments governing how political communication is received, evaluated, and protected. Interventions focused solely on capacity-building are therefore unlikely to produce lasting change without coordinated institutional reforms addressing representation, media regulation, enforcement mechanisms, and gender mainstreaming within democratic governance systems.

Hence, this paper recommends for interconnected policy reforms. First, a temporary, state-mandated **parliamentary quota for women** should be introduced to guarantee representation and counteract structural biases that party-led nominations alone cannot correct. Second, **legal and institutional frameworks should be strengthened to address gendered digital harassment**, with clear definitions, fast-track redress mechanisms, and obligations for platforms to protect women from targeted intimidation that disproportionately undermines political participation. Third, **gender mainstreaming should be embedded across political institutions**, including parliamentary procedures, electoral administration, parties, and media regulation, to ensure that gender equality is a structural principle rather than an "add-on". This prevents marginalisation and biased evaluation of women's contributions. Fourth, **leadership and confidence-building** should be highlighted to support women's political sustainability within mainstream governance structures, enabling women to navigate heightened scrutiny, harassment, and unequal standards of legitimacy, to ensure their participation is substantive and enduring.

## BACKGROUND

Women's political participation in the Maldives has historically remained limited despite formal guarantees of equality under the Constitution. Women currently hold only 3.2 per cent of seats in the national parliament. Policy efforts to improve representation have included temporary gender quotas at the local level, most notably the introduction of a 33 per cent quota for Local Council Elections (UNDP, 2024). While these measures have contributed to incremental gains in local governance, women remain significantly underrepresented in Parliament, and their perspectives continue to be marginal within national law-making and broader governance processes (UNDP, 2017; UNDP, 2023).

Beyond descriptive representation, this pattern raises broader concerns regarding democratic governance. Democratic systems depend on broad participation, contestation, and accountability. When women's political voice and influence are structurally constrained, representation becomes skewed, policy responsiveness narrows, and public trust may erode, particularly where exclusion is normalised or framed as a natural consequence of socially prescribed gender roles. This understanding aligns with rights-based approaches to governance and reflects the framing of gender equality adopted across global policy institutions.

Accordingly, the implications of women's underrepresentation are substantive rather than symbolic. Legislative and policy frameworks risk insufficiently reflecting women's lived experiences, while structural barriers continue to constrain both entry into political life and long-term political sustainability (Krook, 2009; Krook, 2013). These barriers include persistent societal expectations surrounding gender roles, gendered media narratives, limited institutional support within political parties and governance bodies, and heightened exposure to reputational and safety risks associated with political visibility on digital platforms (Maldives Independent, 2025). Thus, these dynamics shape not only who participates in politics, but whose political contributions are recognised as legitimate within national governance processes.

Furthermore, the aforementioned constraints persist despite evidence of substantial social and educational capacity among women. The Maldives reports 98% literacy rates in Dhivehi alongside substantial education attainment where nearly 58% of those who have obtained a degree or higher qualification in the Maldives are women (Census, 2022). This suggests a broad communicative capability among women eligible for political participation. National programming has similarly prioritised leadership development, confidence-building initiatives, and practice parliaments aimed at strengthening women's political skills and exposure (IFES, 2015; UNDP, 2023). Nevertheless, improvements in capability have not translated into proportional gains in national representation. This

capability and representation gap therefore raises a central analytical question: if women possess the skills necessary for political participation, what mechanisms continue to limit their political inclusion?

To address this puzzle, a conceptual orientation grounded in an extensive desk review of literature on gender, political participation, and democratic legitimacy was conducted. This identified communication as a central but under-theorised mechanism shaping women's access to political power (IFES, 2015; UNDP, 2023). Drawing in part on Pierre Bourdieu's theorisation of social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991), the initial hypothesis of the study was that women's political exclusion might be partially explained by communication as expression. Here, communication as expression is defined by differences in linguistic competence and communicative confidence. Within this framework, language and communication were understood as forms of political capital that could enable or constrain participation depending on their alignment with the norms of the political field (Bilecen, 2024; Rossel; 2021). This focus on agency was further strengthened by national programming that has prioritised skills, confidence and exposure such as practice parliaments and leadership training, thus making an 'communication as expression' hypothesis a natural starting point.

However, preliminary analysis and desk review findings indicated that communicative competence alone could not account for persistent underrepresentation in a context characterised by high literacy and expanding leadership training opportunities. The persistence of exclusion despite demonstrated capability redirected analytical attention toward how women's political communication is interpreted, mediated, and legitimised within institutional and public arenas. This led to a conceptual distinction between communication as expression which refers to women's ability to participate confidently and effectively in political spaces and communication as reception, referring to how women's political communication is interpreted, framed, evaluated, and legitimised by media, political institutions, and public discourse. Importantly, this distinction repositioned communication not merely as an individual skill, but as a politically regulated process shaped by power, norms, and institutional practice.

On this basis, the research design was refined to test whether women's communicative capacity functioned as a primary barrier, or whether the decisive constraints lay in the conditions of reception. Key informant interviews and focus group discussions were therefore explicitly framed around both dimensions of communication, allowing the study to examine not only how women communicate in political spaces, but how their communication is received, filtered, and responded to across institutional, media, and digital environments.

This policy paper aims to uncover the mechanisms through which communication shapes women's political participation in the Maldives and to identify actionable interventions to support more inclusive governance. In doing so, it draws attention to structural gaps within existing institutional frameworks, including the absence of gender-sensitive codes of conduct, enforceable media standards, and protections

against political harassment during electoral processes. These gaps are not peripheral; they actively shape the political environment in which women operate, influencing who is heard, who is silenced, and whose participation is deemed legitimate. Accordingly, the research is guided by three primary questions:

1. How do Dhivehi, English, and digital communication skills influence women's opportunities and experiences in the political arena of the Maldives? This includes examining how language functions as both a gatekeeping and enabling mechanism, and how digital literacy affects political visibility and engagement.
2. How are women candidates and leaders represented and responded to in media, social media, and public discourse? This question explores how societal, institutional, and media responses shape perceptions of women's credibility and political legitimacy.
3. How can institutions and civil society organisations strategically address communication-related barriers to women's political participation? This includes assessing opportunities for institutional reform, policy intervention, capacity-building, and narrative changes to support gender-inclusive governance.

The findings that follow demonstrate that while women's communicative capacity is substantial, political exclusion is primarily produced through institutionalised modes of communication as reception.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative policy research design to examine barriers shaping women's political participation in the Maldives, with particular attention to the role of communication in enabling and constraining participation. Conducted over a four-month period, the research combines primary qualitative data with desk-based analysis to generate empirically grounded insights relevant to democratic governance reform.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

The study employed multiple qualitative methods to capture experiences across different levels of governance and political engagement. Primary data collection consisted of key informant interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and observational data gathered during Women's Political Storytelling Circle workshops conducted for women engaged in political parties by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. These methods were complemented by a targeted media review and desk analysis of national legislation, governance frameworks, policy reports, and existing research on women's political participation.

The research design was structured around the three analytical areas derived from the study's guiding research questions:

1. Communication as Expression: examining agency-related dimensions of participation such as Dhivehi, English and digital literacy
2. Communication as Reception: Focusing on structural barriers including media discourse and public evaluation of women political actors
3. Stakeholder-informed perspectives on institutional and policy actions: capable of strengthen participation outcomes

This approach enabled the study to connect lived experiences of political participation with institutional analysis, forming the empirical basis for the policy recommendation advanced in this paper.

## DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected through five complementary methods: desk research, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, targeted media review, and observational engagement. The use of multiple sources enabled comparison across institutional perspectives and strengthened the reliability of findings.

### DESK RESEARCH

A comprehensive desk review was conducted to contextualise women's political participation and inform the analytical framework of the study. The review included government reports, NGO and international organisation publications, academic literature, white papers, and policy studies from neighbouring countries published between 2010 and the present.

Documents were selected based on relevance to the Maldivian context and alignment with the study's thematic focus on political participation, communication practices, institutional barriers, and democratic inclusion. Desk research informed both the development of interview questions and interpretation of empirical findings.

### KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KIIS)

25 key informant interviews were conducted with stakeholders across political and governance institutions. Participants included former Members of Parliament, current and former ministers, elected councillors, political party actors, civil society representatives, media professionals, government officials, disability and inclusion stakeholders, and women who had contested in the 2021 parliamentary elections.

Given the limited number of women occupying political leadership roles, purposive sampling was employed to identify participants with direct experience of political participation. Snowball sampling was

subsequently used to expand participation through professional networks. Many participants occupied multiple institutional roles, allowing cross-sectoral perspectives to emerge.

Interviews followed an open-ended, semi-structured format. Participants received guiding questions in advance, typically organised around nine to twelve thematic prompts, while allowing flexibility for follow-up discussion. Interviews were conducted in Dhivehi or English depending on participant preference and took place through a hybrid format combining in-person and online engagement. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymised.

### **FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS (FGDS)**

Four focus group discussions were conducted with Women's Development Committee members across Greater Malé City, Addu City, Fuvahmulah City, and Kulhudhuffushi City. Group sizes ranged from two to seven participants due to budgetary and scheduling constraints.

FGDs explored local governance experiences, communication practices, digital engagement, and community-level barriers affecting women's political participation. All sessions were facilitated by the lead researcher, audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed manually.

### **TARGETED MEDIA REVIEW**

A descriptive media review was undertaken across four major Maldivian media outlets, *Haveeru*, *Vaguthu*, *Adhadhu*, and *Dhauru*, covering the most recent parliamentary election cycle. Headlines and selected articles referencing women political actors were reviewed to assess patterns of visibility and representation.

Although not conducted as a systematic content analysis, observations were manually documented and used to contextualise stakeholder accounts relating to media discourse and political credibility.

### **OBSERVATIONAL DATA**

Observational data were collected during two Women's Political Storytelling Circle workshops organised by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. The workshops explored experiences of violence against women in politics through facilitated storytelling exercises.

Each workshop included approximately ten participants. The researcher acted as facilitator during one session and observer during the other, recording field notes documenting shared experiences, participation risks, and coping strategies discussed collectively.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND TRIANGULATION

All qualitative data were analysed using manual thematic analysis. Interview, FGD, and observational data were initially organised according to the study's analytical framework before recurring themes were identified across stakeholder groups.

Comparative analysis enabled identification of patterns reported consistently across governance levels. Insights from desk research and media review were integrated throughout analysis to triangulate findings and strengthen interpretive validity. The recurrence of similar experiences across data sources indicated thematic saturation

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Participation was voluntary, and verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to engagement. All data were anonymised, and identifying information was removed during transcription. Research materials were securely stored in password-protected files.

Formal institutional ethical approval was not required, as the research was conducted by a civil society organisation to inform policy dialogue within the CSPN Forum in collaboration with parliamentary stakeholders and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

## METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

As a qualitative study conducted within a relatively small political population, findings are not statistically generalisable. However, methodological triangulation across interviews, focus groups, observation, media review, and desk research strengthen analytical credibility and supports identification of recurring institutional dynamics relevant for policy development.

# FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

## 1.COMMUNICATION AS EXPRESSION

### 1.1 LANGUAGE AND POLITICAL ACCESS

Across key informant interviews and focus group discussions, women demonstrated strong communication capacity across Dhivehi, English, and digital platforms. Fluency in Dhivehi, including sensitivity to local dialects was consistently identified as essential for political legitimacy and effective engagement with constituents. Participants noted that women who could navigate these linguistic nuances were better able to convey ideas, build trust, and mobilise support at local and national levels.

*“... People responded to us when we spoke in our native dialect... people would deem us ‘outsiders’ if we used a Male’ dialect...”*

- Women Development Committee Member

English proficiency emerged as an important communicative skill associated with engagement beyond local governance contexts. Participants noted that English enables interaction within national policy discourse, engagement with younger audiences, and communication with development partners and institutional stakeholders. Moreover, English fluency was seen as essential when engaging with donors. Additionally, it was often associated with perceptions of professionalism and authority.

*“... Being proficient in English is becoming increasingly important not only when it comes to engaging with younger audiences but also once we get elected, we have to engage with national policy discourse and also with international donors who visit the island”*

-Women Island Councillor

While a significant portion of participants from both interviews and FDGs positioned English proficiency as secondary to Dhivehi, discussions with governance and inclusion stakeholders highlighted that communication practices may unintentionally restrict participation where institutional or even political messaging relies exclusively on Dhivehi or lacks accessible formats. These practices were identified as limiting participation for persons with disabilities and other marginalised groups, demonstrating that communication systems themselves can function as mechanisms of exclusion.

*“It becomes difficult for us when the messaging is in Dhivehi... for instance with WDC Elections, the manifestos of participants are nearly always in Dhivehi and that is not accessible for us, thus we do not know who we end up of voting for.”*

- Stakeholder from CSO

## DISCUSSION

These findings show that communication practices serve not only as tools of engagement but also as mechanisms through which governance shapes inclusion. Political participation depends not only on individuals’ communicative abilities but also on how institutions structure the communication processes through which citizens and candidates interact with political systems.

Women were not only proficient in language but also understood communication as a vital instrument of influence and leadership, employing it both before and after elections while in office. This challenges deficit-based explanations of underrepresentation. Instead, participation inequalities arise when institutional communication practices fail to account for accessibility and inclusivity.

Language should therefore be understood as an institutional condition of participation rather than merely an individual competency. Inclusivity considerations must consequently be embedded in how political institutions design and deliver public engagement and decision-making processes.

## 1.2 DIGITAL LITERACY AND EXPANDED POLITICAL VISIBILITY

Digital literacy was widely recognised as an increasingly indispensable component of contemporary political participation. Participants emphasised that social media platforms enable women to amplify visibility, communicate policy positions directly, and engage audiences beyond traditional political networks.

*“... Now everyone is on social media, so it is very easy and quick if we want to get our message across, however, there is always the double-edged sword...”*

*-Women Development Committee Member*

Digital platforms were widely viewed as democratising political communication by lowering barriers to outreach and engagement. Women who may lack entrenched party networks are able to establish public presence independently through online communication.

According to participants, digital platforms were widely viewed as expanding access to political participation by lowering certain financial and organisational barriers traditionally associated with campaigning. Participants noted that online communication enables candidates to disseminate information rapidly, maintain visibility, and engage voters without relying exclusively on resource-intensive campaign activities. For women candidates who often face constraints in accessing campaign financing or party-backed infrastructure, digital engagement provides an alternative means of establishing political presence and recognition.

While digital campaigning does not eliminate the importance of community engagement, stakeholders observed that it allows portions of outreach and communication to occur more efficiently through online interaction, calls, and social media engagement. In local electoral contexts, this was perceived as reducing the frequency and cost associated with repeated mobilisation efforts while sustaining voter contact.

Participants further highlighted that although digital campaigning may involve modest investments such as content production or graphic design, effective online engagement can outweigh these costs by significantly expanding audience reach. Increased visibility through follower growth, message circulation, or viral engagement was described as strengthening candidate recognition and, in some cases, contributing positively to electoral success.

## DISCUSSION

These findings suggest that digital literacy expands communication as expression not only by increasing visibility but also by easing structural entry barriers associated with political campaigning. By reducing selected financial and logistical costs, digital engagement broadens participation pathways for women who may otherwise encounter constraints in accessing traditional campaign resources. Digital participation thus enhances communicative agency while enabling more equitable access to political competition, even as participation outcomes remain shaped by subsequent processes of evaluation and reception.

## 2.COMMUNICATION AS RECEPTION

### 2.1 FROM POLITICAL VISIBILITY TO POLITICAL EVALUATION: THE LIMITS OF COMMUNICATIVE CAPACITY.

Despite strong linguistic and digital communication capacity, participants consistently emphasised that communicative competence alone does not guarantee political access or sustainability. Women who were educated, articulate, and politically active continued to encounter barriers to candidacy and leadership progression

A former Member of Parliament observed:

*“... at the end of day, it is really not a capacity or skills issue... you would see that every woman who has contested, especially for parliament, has a strong career behind them and have been active within their community for years... we need to address these structural issues...”*

Similarly, a current Minister stated:

*“Women’s political voices are shaped far more by institutional design than by individual ability and without deliberate structural reform, women’s participation will remain constrained regardless of individual capacity”*

This observation reflects a recurring theme across our findings: women’s political exclusion cannot be explained through deficits in communication ability, experience, or preparedness.

## DISCUSSION

While women demonstrate strong communicative agency, our research revealed that political legitimacy is largely determined by how women’s communication is interpreted within media, digital, and institutional environments. Thus, the findings demonstrate a clear transition between communication as

expression and communication as reception. Women are able to enter political discourse and sustain public visibility; however, participation outcomes become shaped by how that communication is interpreted and evaluated.

Efforts aimed solely at strengthening individual capacity therefore are unlikely to produce sustained gains in representation. Institutional reforms addressing evaluation standards, political gatekeeping, and participation risks are necessary to ensure communicative participation translates into political authority.

## 2.1 UNEQUAL STANDARDS OF CREDIBILITY AND LEGITIMACY

A dominant theme across interviews was the perception that women are held to significantly higher standards than men in political spaces. Participants repeatedly noted that women must perform exceptionally to be considered equally credible, competent, or legitimate. This expectation applied across electoral campaigns, council work, and parliamentary engagement.

Women candidates were frequently described as needing to prove their seriousness and technical competence in ways that were not demanded of male counterparts. These unequal standards contributed to heightened pressure, self-censorship, and, in some cases, withdrawal from political participation.

*“... we are always held to a higher standard... and have to perform twice as well in comparison to our counterparts”*

- Former Member of Parliament

A similar sentiment was shared by a woman councillor:

*“I see that when I submit a proposal, my work does get looked into twice however, when my male counsellor does, it does not get as much scrutinised”*

The desk review undertaken (UNDP 2024; UNDP 2023; UNDP 2017) for this study reflected similar tendencies, suggesting that political legitimacy is shaped through gendered reception dynamics rather than communicative capacity alone.

## DISCUSSION

These findings indicate that political authority is not determined solely by communicative competence but by institutional evaluation norms governing credibility. Women’s political expression undergoes intensified validation processes before being accepted as authoritative.

Unequal credibility standards therefore function as an early reception filter, interrupting the translation of participation into leadership recognition. Women must continually re-establish legitimacy rather than benefiting from presumed authority.

These dynamics suggest that disparities in political participation cannot be addressed solely through candidate-focused interventions, but require institutional responses that influence how credibility, conduct, and political legitimacy are assessed within political and media environments.

## 2.2 MEDIA NARRATIVES AND THE FRAMING OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Media representation emerged as one of the most influential filters shaping how women's political communication is received. Participants consistently reported that media coverage of women candidates and leaders focused disproportionately on personal attributes, family roles, appearance, or reputation, rather than policy positions or governance performance.

*"... women are mostly spoken in relation with her family but not through her own merit..."*

- A Stakeholder from a CSO

This form of framing was widely viewed as diminishing women's political credibility and reinforcing gender stereotypes. Several informants noted that even when women articulated substantive policy positions, media narratives often reframed their contributions through a gendered or personal lens. As such a current Minister noted the following:

*"Gendered language and framing can undermine public trust and authority, even when women demonstrate competence and leadership. This is visible in how coverage of female politicians often shifts away from their policy positions towards personality, appearance, or tone, subjecting women to faster and harsher judgment cycles."*

These patterns were echoed across national and local media platforms and were observed consistently across election cycles.

## DISCUSSION

Media operates as a narrative-setting institution, establishing interpretive frames through which political leadership is understood (Leavy, 2020). Gendered framing reshapes political communication by associating women's authority with personal legitimacy rather than institutional competence. Such framing weakens policy visibility and reinforces perceptions of women as exceptional or symbolic participants rather than routine political actors.

Media governance frameworks therefore should incorporate gender-sensitive political coverage standards addressing stereotyping, disproportionate personalisation, and biased framing during electoral processes.

## 2.3 DIGITAL HARASSMENT

While digital platforms were recognised as essential tools for political communication, they were also described as among the most hostile spaces for women. Participants reported widespread experiences of gendered online harassment, including personal attacks, moral accusations, and reputational harm. Unlike criticism directed at male politicians, these attacks frequently targeted women's family life, character, or sexuality.

*"... I wanted to contest for the WDC seat in my island, however, I did not want my husband or our families to go through media harassment and hence ultimately I decided not to contest... although I believe I am capable and have worked in my community..."*

- A Stakeholder from a CSO

Such digital hostility was identified as a significant deterrent to political participation, particularly for younger women and first-time candidates. Moreover, the effects of harassment on women and on men are also completely different as it is compounded by the socio-cultural expectations placed on women.

*"... the consequences are more severe for women, because the way women are portrayed and seen in our society. Women's reputation is seen as a 'white cloth'... once tarnished cannot be washed away... this makes it more difficult for women to bounce back when scandals arise or when harassment increases."*

- Council Member

Stakeholders noted that reputational attacks often produce broader community and familial repercussions, increasing the perceived cost of political participation and working as a barrier for entry and continuation within the political arena. As such a representative from the Elections Commission stated:

*"...also we see how harassment is higher for women than for men... and it becomes quite personal when it is for women. Even when certain [social media] posts are being made, you would see how women are targeted and the difference in posts for men... this becomes a deterrent and we see women moving away or stepping away from key positions due to the stigma associated in being a woman in politics"*

A similar concern was shared by a representative from a civil society organisation:

*"... During this digital age, digital harassment for women is a huge challenge for those women in politics and for those who continue to be within the field... it affects the families too and naturally they try to discourage women to come out of it [political field]"*

## DISCUSSION

The aforementioned dynamics suggest that participation risks are unevenly distributed and may discourage both entry into and continuation within political life. Digital harassment therefore functions as a form of informal political regulation. Anticipated hostile reception influences women's willingness to remain politically visible, transforming participation into a risk-management decision rather than a question of capability.

Communication as reception therefore actively shapes future expression, contributing to withdrawal or reduced engagement among potential candidates.

The persistence of reputationally targeted harassment indicates that sustaining women's participation depends on institutional mechanisms able to prevent, address, and respond to gendered forms of political intimidation.

### 2.4. LEGAL PROTECTIONS AND CHALLENGES OF ENFORCEMENT

Participants generally acknowledged the existence of legal frameworks intended to safeguard equality and participation. However, discussions frequently centred on questions of implementation and institutional responsiveness.

*"We can bring in improvements and we have to bring in change but If we are able to implement even the existing laws appropriately it would be very helpful".*

- A Stakeholder from a CSO

Desk analysis (MV Laws, 2023) confirms the presence of relevant legal provisions nevertheless, interview evidence indicates divergence between formal protections and lived political experience. The effectiveness of safeguards was therefore assessed less by legislative existence than by perceived enforceability.

The gap between formal legal protections and stakeholder confidence in their application suggests that participation outcomes are closely linked to the visibility, accessibility, and enforceability of existing institutional safeguards.

## DISCUSSION

Where enforcement mechanisms lack visibility or responsiveness, formal protections fail to alter participation conditions. Institutional inaction contributes to normalisation of harassment and unequal treatment. Legal safeguards therefore influence participation outcomes only when enforcement is credible and accessible.

## 2.5 GENDER NEUTRALITY AND LIMITS OF EQUAL TREATMENT

Stakeholders across governance levels distinguished between formal equality and substantive equity. As such a Maldives Broadcasting Commissioner stated:

*“Regulatory norms explicitly address dignity, non-abuse, non-discrimination, and the respect for the rights and dignity of individuals regardless of colour, gender, age group, or disability status. No comprehensive gender-sensitive criteria exist that are comparable to UNESCO's Gender-Sensitive Indicators for Media (GSIM) or the International Federation of Journalists' gender-responsive election coverage guidelines, such as indicators for the representation of female sources or regulations concerning the mention of familial status, appearance, or sexualization. Consequently, although gender is theoretically safeguarded, it lacks practical indicators, checklists, or explicit allusions to women's political involvement within the electoral guidelines”*

Gender-neutral approaches were often viewed by participants as insufficient in contexts where participation risks and social expectations remain uneven.

*“The law says we are all equal, but there is no equity because there is no provisions or inclusions for marginalised communities”*

- A Stakeholder from a CSO

## DISCUSSION

Treating all political actors identically within structurally unequal environments reproduces inequality while maintaining procedural fairness in appearance. Gender neutrality obscures differentiated barriers rather than resolving them. Hence, governance reform should move toward equity-oriented approaches through systematic gender mainstreaming across electoral administration, parliamentary procedures, and political regulation.

## 2.6 THE 'ADD-ON' APPROACH TO GENDER

An important analytical observation emerging from both stakeholder engagement and institutional desk review is the persistent treatment of gender as an add-on rather than an organising principle of political governance. While gender equality is formally acknowledged across policy discourse and regulatory frameworks, findings indicate that it remains insufficiently embedded within core political and institutional practices.

Civil society stakeholders noted that gender inequality is frequently perceived as a resolved or secondary concern within governance spaces, limiting institutional urgency for reform:

*“Basically, I think that gender equality is not something majority of our people — and I mean the authorities — feel the need for, as they do not think there are gaps.”*

- CSO Stakeholder

This perception contributes to a governance environment in which participation barriers experienced by women are rendered less visible or are interpreted as individual rather than systemic challenges. As a result, gender considerations are often addressed reactively rather than proactively within institutional decision-making.

Desk review undertaken as part of this study reinforces this observation. Engagement with broadcasting and media regulatory bodies indicates that gender is formally recognised within broader principles relating to dignity and non-discrimination, however, it remains weakly operationalised within electoral and political communication oversight.

*“In regulatory terms, gender is therefore a cross-cutting principle on dignity and non-abuse but still treated as a relatively peripheral or reactive issue rather than a fully mainstreamed component of electoral and political coverage regulation”*

- A Maldives Broadcasting Commissioner

This add-on approach was also reflected in institutional interactions, including discussions with electoral stakeholders, where gender considerations were addressed as supplementary rather than structural. Several informants noted a tension between numerical inclusion and substantive influence, with some questioning whether women’s political participation is valued beyond representation. Notably, one informant observed that many of the challenges framed as “women’s issues” including political violence, ethical conduct, and standards of public discourse, are in fact governance and democratic integrity issues that affect all political actors, but are problematically siloed as women-specific concerns. This framing risks marginalising these issues and reinforces the perception that gender equality is peripheral to the functioning of democratic institutions.

The absence of embedded gender-sensitive standards such as enforceable codes of conduct addressing sexist language, discriminatory behaviour, and biased framing contributes to institutional silence. This silence, in turn, signals that women’s political experiences and the conditions under which they participate are secondary, reinforcing exclusionary norms even in the absence of overt discrimination.

### **3. A MISMATCH: COMMUNICATION AS EXPRESSION VS COMMUNICATION AS RECEPTION**

Taken together, these findings highlight a central tension between communication as expression and communication as reception. While women possess the skills, confidence, and capacity to communicate

effectively in political spaces, the ways in which their voices are received, framed, and filtered by media, digital platforms, and institutions significantly constrain political participation and longevity. The study finds that communication as reception plays a more decisive role than expression alone in shaping political outcomes for women.

Furthermore, communication practices themselves further shape inclusivity, influencing whose participation is enabled or constrained within governance processes. The interaction helps explain why agency-focused initiatives alone have produced limited gains in national political representation despite sustained investment over time.

Thus, improving women's political representation requires coordinated reforms addressing access, protection, and long-term participation sustainability within political institutions. These interconnected findings collectively establish the basis for the policy recommendations advanced in the following section.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings of this study demonstrate that barriers to women's political participation are not rooted in deficits of communication skills, confidence, or capacity, but in the structural conditions under which women's political communication is received, evaluated, and sanctioned. While women demonstrate strong communicative competence across linguistic and digital registers, unequal standards of legitimacy, gendered media framing, digital harassment, and the institutional marginalisation of gender considerations significantly constrain political access and sustainability. Addressing these challenges requires institutional and legal reforms that go beyond individual capacity-building. The following policy recommendations are directly informed by the study's findings.

### **1. INTRODUCTION OF A TEMPORARY PARLIAMENTARY QUOTA FOR WOMEN**

The persistent mismatch between women demonstrated political capacity and their electoral and parliamentary outcomes indicates that political competition does not operate on equal terms. Women are required to meet higher standards of credibility and legitimacy than their male counterparts, undermining the principle of merit-based political participation. These unequal conditions persist even where women possess comparable or superior communicative, professional, and leadership credentials.

A temporary parliamentary quota for women is therefore recommended as a corrective mechanism to address these structurally unequal conditions. Such a quota should be time-bound and subject to periodic review, with the explicit objective of normalising women's political authority and reducing the perception of women as exceptional or symbolic actors within legislative spaces. To ensure effectiveness, quota

measures should be accompanied by placement mandates and transparent candidate selection processes within political parties, preventing the concentration of women candidates in unwinnable seats.

Importantly, the appropriateness of a quota-based intervention emerged as a contested issue during data collection. Civil society organisations and institutional stakeholders frequently emphasised the need for political parties to voluntarily adopt quota or seat allocation mechanisms. However, interviews with Members of Parliament and party officials revealed a more sceptical assessment of party-led reform. Many informants noted that political parties are inherently self-interested electoral actors and are therefore unlikely to prioritise gender inclusion where it is perceived to conflict with electoral competitiveness. Within party structures, male candidates were widely regarded as more “winnable,” resulting in their systematic prioritisation during candidate selection processes, even in the absence of explicit discrimination.

Therefore, while mandating political parties to nominate a minimum percentage of women candidates is often proposed as a less intrusive alternative, such measures are unlikely to produce substantive change in contexts where political competition is structurally gendered. Candidate quotas regulate access to nomination but do not correct unequal conditions of electoral competition, including gendered media framing, biased voter reception, unequal resource allocation, and heightened exposure to political harassment. In contexts where political communication is systematically filtered through gendered norms of credibility and legitimacy, regulating access to candidacy without regulating representational outcomes reproduces inequality in procedural form rather than correcting it. Therefore, in arguing for political party mandated quotas, compliance with candidate quotas may be procedural rather than substantive, with women concentrated in unwinnable constituencies or symbolic positions. A parliamentary quota, by contrast, intervenes at the level of political outcomes, ensuring representative legitimacy even where communicative and institutional biases persist. It therefore constitutes a more effective and proportionate response to systemic exclusion than party-based nomination requirements alone.

To ensure effectiveness, quota measures should be accompanied by placement mandates and transparent candidate selection processes within political parties, preventing the concentration of women candidates in unwinnable seats. Framed in this way, temporary quotas function not as preferential treatment, but as a democratic integrity measure designed to offset entrenched biases in political reception and evaluation.

## **2. STRENGTHENING LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL PROTECTIONS AGAINST DIGITAL HARASSMENT**

The study identifies gendered digital harassment as a significant deterrent to women’s political participation, particularly for younger and first-time candidates. Online abuse targeting women’s

morality, family life, and personal reputation operates as a form of political intimidation that is distinct in nature and impact from criticism directed at male politicians. The absence of clear legal definitions and institutional response mechanisms has contributed to a climate of impunity that normalises such behaviour

It is therefore recommended that electoral and legal frameworks be strengthened to explicitly recognise and address gendered political harassment, including online abuse during election periods. This should include clear legal definitions, fast-track complaint and redress mechanisms managed by electoral authorities, and obligations for digital platforms to comply with nationally defined standards for electoral integrity and political safety

Framing digital harassment as a governance and democratic integrity issue, rather than a private or women-specific problem, is critical. By doing so, states signal that the safety, legitimacy, and inclusiveness of electoral processes are collective responsibilities, and that attacks targeting women politicians threaten the credibility of democratic institutions as a whole. Robust protections against digital harassment are therefore essential not only for individual candidates but for safeguarding the integrity and inclusivity of democratic competition.

### 3. GENDER MAINSTREAMING ACROSS THE POLITICAL FIELD

An important finding of the study is the persistent treatment of gender as an “add-on” rather than an organising principle of political institutions. Gender equality is frequently acknowledged at the level of discourse, yet rarely embedded within the core procedures of parliamentary operations, electoral administration, political party governance, or media regulation. Parallel structures, such as women’s wings or committees, have often resulted in numerical inclusion without substantive influence.

To address this, gender mainstreaming must be institutionalised across all political and governance bodies. UN Women (2022) defines gender mainstreaming as making women’s and men’s concerns an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes; this logically includes political rules and norms that structure candidacy, parliamentary work, political communication and accountability. The OECD’s practical toolkit similarly emphasises governance and accountability mechanisms such as self-assessment tools, clarity of mandates, monitoring, and institutional responsibility as the implementation backbone of mainstreaming (OECD, 2023).

In the Maldives, mainstreaming can and should be anchored to existing national frameworks and institutions rather than framed as a new agenda. The “role of gender data” work highlights the Gender Equality Act, the National Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP), and the 33% local council quota as key normative measures, while also noting the need for stronger gender statistics and indicators as tools for

mainstreaming within policy-making. A mainstreaming recommendation is therefore strengthened when framed as “implementing and operationalising existing national commitments through enforceable procedures

Mainstreaming must be specific and enforceable to avoid becoming symbolic. The minimum package should include: (a) enforceable codes of conduct and complaint pathways within parliament and parties (including sanctions and training obligations); (b) gender-sensitive electoral administration standards (candidate support, complaint handling, public communication standards); (c) institutional capacity and accountability (named senior owners, reporting duties, annual dashboards); and (d) a data and evaluation spine (gender-disaggregated indicators on candidacy, outcomes, leadership roles, and harassment reporting/response). Where media regulation is part of the governance environment, mainstreaming should also engage the current media regulatory configuration, including formal codes of conduct and standards-setting mechanisms

By framing issues such as political harassment, ethical conduct, and public discourse as governance concerns rather than women-specific issues, gender mainstreaming strengthens institutional accountability and democratic legitimacy. It shifts the responsibility from individual women to institutions themselves, signalling that equitable participation is a structural obligation and ensuring that gender equality is integrated into the functioning of political systems, not siloed as a marginal concern.

#### **4. LEADERSHIP AND CONFIDENCE-BUILDING SUPPORT**

While structural reform is central, the study recognises that sustained exposure to scrutiny, harassment, and delegitimisation erodes political confidence over time and can drive strategic withdrawal. Leadership and confidence-building support therefore remains essential, but it should be framed as enabling political sustainability in structurally hostile environments and not as compensating for personal deficits.

Within the current context, a lack of sustained support systems that follows women through the “high-risk points” of political participation such as pre-nomination selection, campaigning periods, visibility surges, harassment incidents, and post-election integration into decision-making roles is noted. A strengthened recommendation therefore specifies an integrated package including: long-term mentoring and peer networks (cross-party options matter in polarised contexts), media engagement support, digital safety and rapid-response support, and provision of legal and psychosocial support pathways when harassment occurs.

Leadership and confidence-building support is not merely about skill development; it is about enabling political sustainability in environments characterised by structural hostility and unequal evaluation standards. When combined with institutional reforms and protections, such programs enhance women’s

capacity to persist, lead effectively, and influence policy in ways that are substantive rather than tokenistic.

## CONCLUSION


This study set out to examine women's political participation through the lens of communication, moving beyond conventional assumptions that locate exclusion in deficits of skill, confidence, or capacity. The findings demonstrate that women engaged in political life possess strong communicative competencies across linguistic, institutional, and digital domains. Fluency in Dhivehi, proficiency in English, and digital literacy enable women to articulate policy positions, mobilise constituencies, and engage across levels of governance. However, these capacities alone do not translate into equitable political access or sustainability.

The central contribution of this research lies in identifying a persistent mismatch between communication as expression and communication as reception. While women are able to communicate effectively, the ways in which their political speech is received, framed, and judged are shaped by unequal standards of credibility, gendered media narratives, and hostile digital environments. Women are routinely required to demonstrate higher levels of competence, and resilience than their male counterparts, often under conditions of heightened scrutiny and personal attack. These dynamics not only undermine women's political authority but also contribute to self-censorship, political withdrawal, and the erosion of confidence over time.

The study further highlights the limitations of institutional approaches that treat gender as a supplementary concern rather than a structural dimension of democratic practice. The persistence of parallel women-focused structures, combined with the absence of enforceable gender-sensitive standards within core political institutions, reinforces the marginalisation of women's political experiences. By framing political harassment, ethical conduct, and public discourse as "women's issues," institutions risk obscuring their broader implications for democratic integrity and accountability.

These findings underscore the inadequacy of policy responses that focus primarily on individual capacity-building. While leadership development and skills training remain important, they are insufficient in the absence of reforms that address the institutional, legal, and cultural conditions shaping political reception. Meaningful progress requires structural interventions that recalibrate how political legitimacy is constructed, how political speech is regulated, and how democratic institutions respond to exclusionary practices.

This study is subject to the following limitations. Its focus on urban areas means that local dynamics on other islands may not be fully represented, and time constraints limited the number of interviews and focus group discussions conducted. Finally, the study prioritised women's perspectives to highlight their



experiences in political spaces, so male perspectives were not extensively explored, which may limit understanding of broader societal and institutional attitudes towards gender and politics. Hence, future research could build on this study by exploring political participation dynamics in rural and remote islands and incorporating the perspectives of male stakeholders, to provide a fuller understanding of the structural and cultural factors shaping women's political engagement.

By foregrounding communication as reception, this research contributes to broader debates on gender and democracy, offering a framework for understanding political participation that centres institutional responsibility rather than individual adaptation. Ensuring women's equal participation in political life is not only a matter of representation, but a measure of democratic quality itself. Addressing the barriers identified in this study is therefore essential not only for advancing gender equality, but for strengthening the legitimacy, inclusiveness, and resilience of democratic governance.

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