

## PATH TO PROGRESS:

Ensuring Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in the Maldives

UNFPA'S 6TH COUNTRY PROGRAMME OF ASSISTANCE 2016-2021



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### **RMNCAH**

## REPRODUCTIVE, MATERNAL, NEWBORN, CHILD & ADOLESCENT HEALTH UNDER ONE ROOF



The Reproductive Health Centre at Hulhumale' Hospital is a one-stop centre for comprehensive and integrated sexual and reproductive health services Photo: © UNFPA Maldives

Over the last 30 years, Maldives has seen a tremendous fall in the maternal mortality rate. In 1990, 677 women died in the Maldives due to pregnancy related causes. Today, Minister of Health Ahmed Naseem said "it has fallen to something quite remarkable. Through programs implemented with the support of UNFPA, we have surpassed the millennium development goal target and our current maternal mortality rate stands at 61". This progress however, has stagnated over the recent years and the need for significantly improving the healthcare services to reach the last mile requires systemic change and a different approach to reach those furthest left behind.

"What we need is a comprehensive plan to address issues of Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child & Adolescent Health (RMNCAH)", Dr Jumailath Beygum, Medical Director at Hulhumale' Hospital said, "While we previously worked under a master health plan including reproductive health it was limited in its scope towards providing care".

With UNFPA's support the National RMNCAH Strategy and Action plan was developed, the first of its kind in the Maldives, pulling the needs of the human life cycle under one umbrella. The strategy is a milestone development in ensuring quality access to SRH services for all ages - a core component of UNFPA's leaving no one behind strategy.

An important component of the strategy is to provide service centres with trained personnel to provide quality, youth friendly, non-judgemental and inclusive services. As such, UNFPA has actively engaged with regional hospitals in setting up Reproductive Health Centres in Kulhudhuffushi as well as in Hulhumale'. We also engage with the civil society and academic institutions such as Maldives National University to build capacity in SRH, within the RMNCAH strategy.

### CHALLENGES TO EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

While the geographical challenges continue to play an important role in affecting service delivery, Dr Jumailath also highlighted the challenges brought up by the emphasis on clinical service provision, "We need to move away from the clinical approach and work towards a more comprehensive one stop plan".

This requires investments in public health and re-orienting health care to include services such as home visits and increase dissemination of community based SRH information to the general public.

This is one of the goals the Ministry of Health is currently working towards.





Top: Health worker in a Procedure Room at the Reproductive Health Centre, Hulhumale' Hospital Bottom: Patients waiting to be seen at the Reproductive Health Centre in Hulhumale' Hospital Photo: © UNFPA Maldives

"What we are trying to do is introduce preventive care, so for example, from the time the person is pregnant, health care workers will be visiting the patient at home allowing for any issues related to the pregnancy to be observed and addressed at an early stage without having to go into clinical care." Minister Naseem said, "The work ahead is to implement it across the country. We are doing a pilot program at the moment in 25 islands and it is being very well received. We hope that by the end of 2022, we will be able to effectively roll out this program."

#### MOVING FORWARD

Much work remains to be done to incorporate an inclusive strategy in SRH provision of services and information in the community. "UNFPA has played an important role in ensuring that the RMNCAH strategy comes together and they continue to be one of our main partners when it comes to educating people; the service providers and the general public alike" Dr. Jumailath said, "we need to continue to bring everyone, stakeholders from across sectors, to the same page".



Minister of Health Ahmed Naseem at his office Photo: © UNFPA Maldives



# POPULATION DATA FOR POLICY CHANGE

Over the past three decades, Maldives has experienced rapid social and economic change. It was also during this period that we saw the completion of a demographic transition - the fall of high crude birth and death rates, a decline in fertility rate as well as the emergence of youth as a significant demographic force. This informs our current reality as young people in the Maldives provides us with a demographic dividend - stressing the importance of a major transition and the potential for vibrant new talents and true social change

The immediate need for these new demographic trends to play a major role in driving development issues in the Maldives was further demonstrated by the 2014 Population and Housing Census. Based on the 2014 Census, UNFPA and the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) commissioned the "Maldives' Population Dynamics: Policy Prospects for Human Growth and Opportunity" report in 2016. The report highlighted three main issues Maldives needed to take advantage of; Improving youth's human capital and reproductive health outcomes (including gender equitable policies); capturing the first demographic dividend; and managing internal and international migration.

The findings and recommendations of the report lay the groundwork for the series of population dialogues and discussions organised by UNFPA under the theme "Fahi Oiyvaru" - highlighting the important work that UNFPA does to disseminate population information as the foremost UN agency in researching and identifying the population trends.

These discussions were held among technical and academic institutions as well as civil society actors to discuss key population issues and policy implications such as population composition and dynamics, migration, demographic dividend, and changing population structures including youth and the ageing population. Such discussions are crucial not only to make communities more aware of the transitions, but also to inform and equip ourselves when making development programmes reaching everyone.

"There is still a lack of understanding amongst policy makers on how critical population issues are and that we need immediate action" Chief Statistician of NBS Aishath Shahudha said, emphasising on the need for these dialogues.

UNFPA in the Maldives has been a longstanding and critical partner for the NBS in helping create this awareness and understanding, providing technical support to the institution in the analysis of data and in the subsequent advocacy work; both with the public and policy makers. Such capacity building ensures our efforts in development are keeping up with the current times.

One of the challenges faced by the institution in advocating for policy change was the lack of data at the island level. To overcome this obstacle, NBS sought the support of UNFPA in developing population projections. As such, UNFPA sought to build the capacity of the NBS as the foremost institution in analysing data and statistics in the Maldives.

"Earlier projections were done for the whole country, not specific to islands. But we needed to be able to show long term trends on a micro level, especially for the capital of Male'", Shahudha said, "for example using the population projections for Male' we were able to show policy makers the impact of centralisation policies. This was the first time population projections had been done specific to Male' - and it was very effective."

Aishath Shahudha, Chief Statistician of NBS, Photo: © UNFPA Maldives



Population projects are important to incorporate population and development issues into national planning strategies in a comprehensive and holistic manner and to support the formulation of targeted policies focused on different segments of the population. For instance, statistics suggest that Maldivians are now living longer, but are subjected to non-communicable diseases; thus, this informs the healthcare sector as well as planners in the government to take heed to life expectancy discrepancies and anomalies.

This view is upheld by the NBS as they state - "Through making the information and the projections more accessible, we were able to challenge long held beliefs over important issues like migrant workers. While predominantly migration is regarded as being a burden, through this endeavour we were able to introduce migration as an asset that needed to be incorporated into our national planning as such".

Another main target population highlighted was young people. Currently, 51% of the working population are youth, out of which 28% are not in education,



Set of postcards showing 100 years of population data mapped out by island Photo: © UNFPA Maldives

Zoom meeting at Planning Ministry with UNFPA and NBS Photo: © UNFPA Maldives



employment or training (NEET) - with 48% being women. As the reports and projections showed, timely policy interventions and increased access for the youth, especially women and girls to employment was critical for the potential demographic bonus to be taken advantage of. Consequently, UNFPA actively works to streamline such population dynamics into planning frameworks and remind policy makers of including everyone in the development process in line with our leave no one behind strategy.

This therefore, ensures that we work towards strengthening population and development research within the institutional settings to address and raise awareness on population and development issues. All these efforts lay the groundwork for new conversations in the Maldives - helping enhance youth's human capital and gender equality, capture the first demographic dividend by leaving no one behind, manage national and international migrations, and foremost - to change the harmful norms that regress our society all too much.

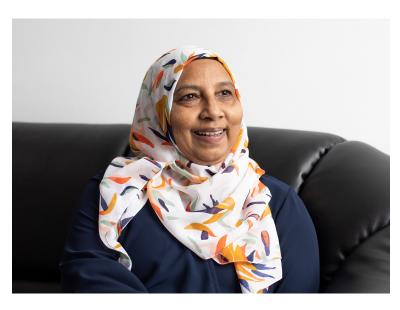


In the Maldives, and in many countries across the world, 1 in 3 women experience some form of violence in their lifetime.. The health impacts of gender-based violence and domestic violence on women and their children are significant - resulting in serious injuries such as physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health problems, including sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies. These acts of violence has ripple effects throughout the workplace, the community, and the economy. Estimates show that the costs of violence against women to the global economy amounts to 2% of global GDP or US\$1.5 trillion.

Having supported the development of the Health Sector response to GBV: National Guideline on providing care and prevention for Health Care Providers and the online course for health care providers, UNFPA continues to help strengthen the health sector to support the implementation of the national guidelines and engage young people to raise awareness on the impact of GBV. UNFPA also continues to work on improving the service provision and capacity building of social sector service providers in the efforts to respond and prevent GBV in the Maldives.

## FIGHTING THE SHADOW PANDEMIC

### ADDRESSING GENDER BASED VIOLENCE



Minister of Gender Family and Social Services, Aisha Didi Photo: © UNFPA Maldives

#### STARTING THE CONVERSATIONS

Conversations around Gender-based Violence (GBV) have historically been "a silent discussion" in the Maldives. In the 90s and the early 2000s, it was rare for the Ministry of Gender to receive cases and cases that were reported to the police were too often recalled.

For the Minister of Gender, Family and Social Services, Aisha Didi, the The Maldives Study on Women's Health and Life Experiences" (WHLE) survey in 2006—conducted with the support of UNFPA and other UN institutions, marked a significant change in the conversation around gender based violence in the Maldives.

The publication of the WHLE data showed that 1 in 3 women aged 15-49 have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence during their lifetime. The report was further evidence of the fact that violence against women must be addressed as a major public health issue, impacting significantly on the physical, mental and reproductive health of women and girls and called on the the health sector to take

a proactive role in responding to violence against women as they would any other health problem.

As irrefutable proof of the reality of gender based violence, the report shed light on the everyday experiences of women in the Maldives - stressing on the toll posed by harmful norms perpetuated within the community.

"Convincing people of the statistics was still hard, but it brought to the table, evidence that we needed to have the conversation", Minister Aisha recalled. A decade later, it is these wins that have helped put the issue of women's rights and the violence against women consistently at the forefront.

UNFPA played a convening role together with stakeholders from the government and civil society to advocate for important rights included in the Gender Equality Act which was enacted in 2016.

## FIGHTING GENDER BASED VIOLENCE DURING THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic forced large parts of the Maldives into strict lock-down, and as emerging global data showed an increase in calls to domestic violence helplines as women were cut off from their support networks, the lived reality of Maldivian women was no exception.

"COVID-19 has been our biggest challenge. While the number of reported DV and GBV cases are low, we have been overwhelmed by the reports of psychiatric conditions and mental health issues of women and children" Minister Aisha said, "These aren't random, and this phenomena has also been noticed globally— we are dealing with the results of the violence women and children had to face at home during the lockdown".

It was for these reasons that UNFPA supported the Ministry to produce 12-episode TV series, Saasthura, to create awareness about the gendered norms in the Malidves, leading to violence against women and



Poster for TV series Saasthura created to advocate for preventing DV and GBV Photo: © UNFPA Maldives

girls, and especially empowering survivors to report and seek required services.

Aminath Shirani Naeem, Deputy Director General of the Ministry's Family & Community Development Division who worked closely in the development of Saasthura highlighted "a huge focus has been given on discouraging attitudes and behaviors which leads to domestic violence such as stereotyping and victim blaming. We believe that awareness is key to prevent domestic violence and victims or survivors need to be encouraged to overcome the situation rather than staying with the perpetrators."

Since Saasthura was broadcasted on TV, the Ministry has received positive feedback from the general public.

"It has been known from a few people so far that they have got the encouragement for reporting after watching a particular episode of the program and that can be seen as a great outcome of the series." Shirani said, speaking about the impact of the program.

On the onset of the pandemic, UNFPA has been working to advocate for women's rights and the prevention of GBV.

We continue to stress on the importance of changing harmful social and gender norms and practices that promotes GBV - it is indeed the end goal and wider vision. Programmes and advocacy must lead to transformative results. In disseminating this wider message and advocacy on Domestic Violence (DV) and GBV, UNFPA continues to support the development of publications in the form of booklets, posters and social media stories to highlight the progress and the work that remains to be done. The work to establish a comprehensive GBV referral mechanism, and advocacy on changing harmful social norms, encourage service seeking and support legislative change in line with international standards, remains to be

UNFPA's cornerstone work in ending violence against women and girls.

#### **MOVING FORWARD**

In the 90s, following the publication of the first CEDAW report - a lot of attention were given to advocacy and sensitization trainings in the Maldives. The focus of the trainings and workshops were geared towards gender equality and the formulation of a gender agenda.

"Back then interventions in the area were led by the government based on international obligations, not necessarily demanded by the community" Minister Aisha said.

"But this is different today,"
Minister Aisha emphasised, "The
demand generation, when it
comes to addressing issues of
gender and women's rights, is by
the community, by activists and
advocates for women's rights
and ending VAW. This is a likely
result of the continuous advocacy
by organisations like UNFPA and
the work that has been done to
increase sensitization on issues
around women's rights and GBV.
Education efforts have paid off"

Today, we need to continue building on these sensitisation efforts - starting from the Judiciary and government institutions, to the general public. "This is one area where UNFPA's constant support is crucial for the Ministry".



The COVID-19 pandemic heightened challenges in providing sexual and reproductive healthcare, as health resources were redeployed to address the pandemic. The significant stress on the healthcare system also undermines its ability to ensure the provision of responsive and respectful care. Moreover, the impacts of such disruptions on marginalised communities and the corresponding effects on their Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) should not be ignored.

Promoting and ensuring accountability for SRHR has been challenging and UNFPA strives to strengthen the sexual reproductive health programme in the Maldives, by supporting the government's efforts, including providing technical support to building capacity of health professionals, public health workers and undertaking research.

## ONE-STOP SOLUTIONS

## PROVIDING QUALITY SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CARE FOR EVERYONE



Waiting area at "Ufanveni Sihhathu", the newly inaugrated Sexual and Reproductive Health Centre at Hulhumalé Hospital Photo: © UNFPA Maldives

The need for accessible, inclusive, and non-judgemental sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services is evident in the Maldives. Research shows that the unmet need for family planning is at 31 percent and just 14.9 percent of married women use any modern contraceptive methods. While there are a variety of reasons that hinder access to services, one of the main obstacles is the quality and unequal distribution of reproductive health services across the country.

Currently, the specialized reproductive health services outside of Male', the capital, are too often neglected and underutilized, with a majority of patients seeking tertiary care in Male'. In order to address this imbalance of service utilization, UNFPA supported the Kulhudhuffushi Regional Hospital (KRH) and the Hulhumalé Hospital in setting up the Sexual and Reproductive Health Centre. Ufanveni, the Sexual and Reproductive Health Center established in Kulhudhuffushi was designed as a one-stop for providing services at the Hospital.

KRH is a main health hub in the northern region covering the populations of H.Dh, H.A and Sh. Atolls, with the population of more than 63,000,

Highlighting the challenges the hospital currently faces in providing reproductive health services, Senior Community Health Officer Sameena Mohamed mentioned that the "lack of space and infrastructural limitation is the most challenging area regarding service provision in the KRH".

The hospital currently has only one consultation room for antenatal care, prenatal care and all other gynaecological cases during regular consulting times. This results in limited time for consultations, lack of privacy and inability to provide adequate attention for individual issues.

Moreover, the lack of space for consistent one to one or group awareness sessions often results in "people missing those sessions which result in lack of awareness about their condition and preventive measures they can take if they have any high risk condition", Sameena explained.

The new reproductive health centre developed with UNFPA support would ease a lot of these problems. Antenatal and prenatal care services will be available at the centre. These changes provided at the centre will contribute to steady progress in achieving zero maternal deaths, zero gender based violence and zero harmful practices such as child marriage and FGM by 2030.

Senior Community Health Officer Sameena Mohamed, Kulhudhuffushi Regional Hospital Photo: © UNFPA Maldives



With the redistribution of resources to address the COVID-19 pandemic, the provision of sexual and reproductive health services has also been hindered over the course of the past year. As such, Sameena highlighted that the Sexual Reproductive Health and Gender Based Violence response training conducted by UNFPA during this period was "a great help to gain new updates and refresh the knowledge regarding different areas of reproductive health".



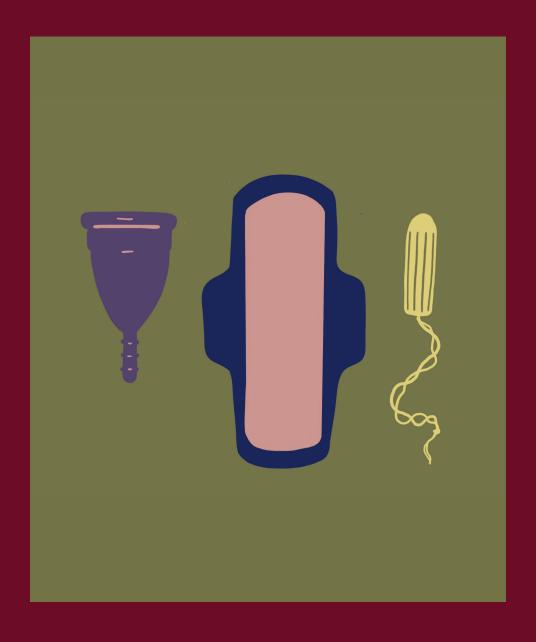
The newly inaugrated Sexual and Reproductive Health Center at Kulhudhuffushi Regional Hospital caters to the populations of the 3 nrthern most atolls Photo: © UNFPA Maldives

The training included components on adolescent friendly health services, antenatal & postnatal care, health sector response to gender based violence, maternal & child health and family planning for a healthy family.

"One of the best parts of the training was that UNFPA gave us the opportunity to participate the maximum number of participants from all the islands of the H.Dh atoll. So the knowledge gained from the training would reflect on their work", Sameena said.

The reproductive health centers are an important and critical first step in the journey towards providing easily accessible and non-discriminatory services. Highlighting areas where work still needs to be done, Dr. Jumailath, Medical Director at Hulhumale' Hospital said, "Currently, our approach to addressing the needs of patients is still very clinical. There is still a lot of work done to ensure an open and friendly environment - this is what will encourage people to actually come and get the full range of services offered at the centres".

Sexual and reproductive health rights liberates individuals. It provides a healthy and decent pathway for women and girls, to plan out their life and age with dignity. Thus, UNFPA's core values include ensuring the right to bodily autonomy and increasing accessibility to SRH services for all, regardless of their age, gender, and place of living. The Ufanveni centre in Kulhudhuffushi and Hulhumale' is a milestone for UNFPA and indeed Maldives, inching closer to achieving universal access to SRH services in the wider population.



## PERIOD VAAHAKA

## BREAKING THE TABOO AROUND MENSTRUAL HEALTH, ONE CONVERSATION AT A TIME.

Reproductive and menstrual health has always been a taboo topic in the Maldives for a multitude of reasons; research by UNFPA indicates that while adolescent health services are an important segment of SRH services, young people face challenges in seeking services due to cultural and societal norms – a problem further aggravated by the lack of regular education sessions on sexual and reproductive health in schools. Despite the socio—cultural standings on SRH and bodily autonomy, UNFPA Maldives strives to ensure these topics are not talked about in hushed tones.

Thus, in order to raise awareness on these issues and introduce sustainable solutions to meet the demands of women and girls, UNFPA initiated a pilot project, the Cupvert Project in the year 2019 with partnership from Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

Explaining the objectives of the Cupvert campaign, co-founder of Zero Waste Maldives, a partner of the campaign, Hamsha Hussein said, "we noticed that people don't have a lot of information about their own bodies and that the education system fails to teach people about their bodily autonomy – so while one of the main objective of the workshops was to raise awareness, it was also crucial to make people more comfortable about their own bodies".

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the conversation was kept alive by online sessions "Period Vaahaka" organized jointly by ZeroWaste Maldives, Society for Health Education (SHE) and UNFPA. These sessions provided a safe space online for participants to discuss challenges they faced in accessing sexual and reproductive health care information and services.

UNFPA also partnered up with ZeroWaste Maldives and SHE to mark the Global Menstrual Hygiene Day by hosting a webinar where government policy makers, health sector representatives, advocates and CSOs working on reproductive health issues discussed menstrual health and the related issues faced in the community. This was the first public discussion on menstrual health joined by high-level government representatives including the First Lady

Fazna Ahmed and the State Minister of Education Aishath Athiya Naseer.

While these efforts have gone a long way towards breaking the stigma and creating space for conversations around reproductive health, especially amongst young people, marginalized communities, including persons with disabilities continue to face challenges.

Appropriate resources providing information on sexual and reproductive health and services for persons with disabilities are still hard to come by, even at SRH service centers. As such, translating any communication to sign language, for example, is often left to those clients seeking these services.



Hamsha Hussein, Co-founder of Zero Waste Maldives briefing a cupvert session participant Photo: © UNFPA Maldives

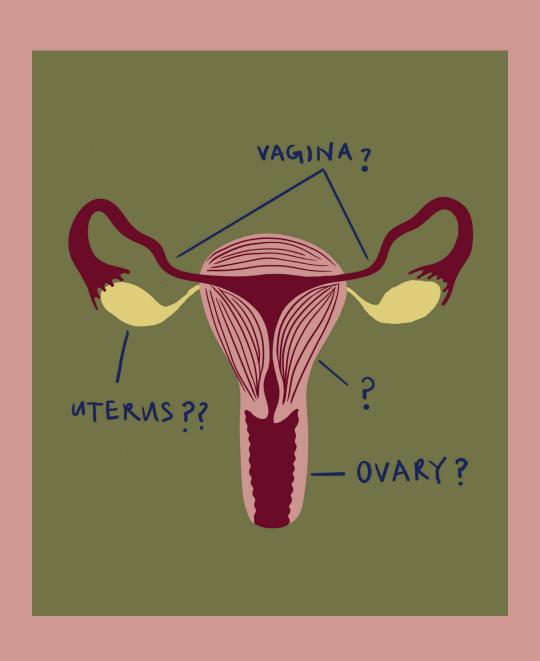
In keeping the promise to leave no one behind, UNFPA actively strives to be inclusive of all people in its development programme efforts. Accordingly, in one session, Hamsha and her team were able to take a first step towards overcoming the barriers for persons with disabilities . They hosted it for the deaf community, introducing issues of reproductive health and sustainable period products, furthering our efforts to expand SRH information to everyone in the community.

Noting the continuous support they have received by UNFPA in organizing and conducting the sessions, Hamsha emphasized that connections they have been able to make through the organisation have been crucial in order to expand their work, and to ensure they are able to to connect more inclusively with larger audiences. This ensures the work to be sustained, in changing the norms in the society.





Zero Waste Maldives shooting testimonial videos of participants who joined their cupvert session Photo: © UNFPA Maldives



Transforming the lives of young people has been the focus of UNFPA's 6th Country Programme. Through focused interventions UNFPA has been working with national stakeholders, civil society partners and advocates, to improve access to youth friendly health services, including access to reproductive and sexual health information and services, improve access to education, and prepare young people for employment by advocating for policy interventions to increase investments for youth and marginalized adolescents across the country.

## FILLING IN THE GAPS

## RIFU AND HER WORK TO LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND.

Finishing school as a business stream student in 2016, Fathimath Rifdha (Rifu) recalled receiving no information or sessions during her secondary schooling years about her body, sexual health or relationships.

"When it came to body parts, especially sex organs, we were never taught the correct names or terminology. They had been previously introduced or referred to as 'dirty' or using slang. I had so many misconceptions about my body."

Rifu was already an active volunteer and engaging her peers in conversations around their questions regarding their bodies, sex and contraception, when she got the opportunity to join the UNFPA peer educator training in 2019.

"I wanted to take part in the peer educator training mostly to be educated and ensure the information I passed on to my peers was accurate".

The training broadened her knowledge on so many issues.

"Everything was
so new - it was
uncomfortable at times,
but so important",
Rifu explained, "It
was through the
training that I got basic
information about
simple facts - like the
difference between
the vagina and vulva
to where we pee or
where period blood
comes from."



Fathimath Rifdha, Participant of UNFPA peer educator training Photo: © UNFPA Maldives

Since the training Rifu has been able to put everything she learnt to use—from answering questions her friends and colleagues have had regarding family planning and contraceptive use, to guiding them towards seeking help and making referrals to organisations providing sexual and reproductive health services.

Her advocacy around sexual and reproductive health is also a large part of the instagram page where she talks often about sex, STIs and the many connections these issues have to mental wellbeing. When people reach out to her regarding issues they face, as they often do, Rifu is able to connect them to existing support systems.

When asked what needs to be done to ensure that every young person has the same information she does, Rifu is full of ideas!

"I have so much to say. I believe we first need to educate teachers and parents about why such information is important to young people." Rifu stressed, "we also need to challenge the notion that speaking about these issues are 'vulgar' or not permissible in our religion— that is how we can start to make critical information accessible to students and teenagers."

The challenges in ensuring no child is left behind, especially when it comes to equipping them with the correct information about their bodies, sexual health and well-being are complex; from the challenges in adopting and effectively implementing a comprehensive sexual and reproductive health curriculum, misinformation and disinformation regarding SRH education, to longstanding cultural and social beliefs that conversations pertaining to bodies and sex should only be had in secret and not in classrooms.

However, with continuous advocacy by UNFPA, the Government of Maldives has pledged at the 25th International Convention on Population and Development to strengthen reproductive health policies and

programmes to address ASRH and ensure better access to reproductive health commodities through providing age and gender appropriate reproductive health services to adolescents and young people.

While there is still a lot of work to be done to transform the commitments from paper to action, it is activists and educators like Rifu, empowered by the information and training they have received, who play a crucial role in filling in the gaps to create accessible sexual and reproductive health information and services.

"The UNFPA Peer Educators training was the best training I have participated in it was a hectic period, but I didn't miss a single day. We understood how important the information we were receiving was, and they made sure we had a lot of fun too"





Top: Teaching materials used to show how to insert a reusable period cup. Bottom: Reusable menstrual pads and cups for distribution Photo: © UNFPA Maldives

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