

Breaking the silence around sexual violence

A NATIONAL CAMPAIGN IN THE MALDIVES

COUNTRY/COUNTRIES:

Maldives

PARTNERS:

The Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services (MoGFSS) and UNICEF

THEMATIC AREAS:

Violence against children (VAC), including gender-based violence (GBV)

COVERAGE OF SYSTEMS CHANGE:

Nationwide

KEY RESULTS:

UNICEF Maldives has been working with the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services (MoGFSS) to enhance case management, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and prevention of violence against children during COVID-19. Key results from this work include:

- 1) Launching the “Breaking the silence” campaign in the Maldives as part of a comprehensive strategy to tackle sexual violence against children, a situation of great concern that increased during the COVID-19 crisis. This campaign has four main areas including: breaking the silence and empowering survivors to report and seek help; increasing primary prevention activities; increasing the capacity of service providers to respond to sexual violence; and ensuring fast track justice for the victims;
- 2) Expanding services through civil society organisations to respond to sexual and gender-based violence; and
- 3) Recruitment and training of a social work supervisor as part of technical assistance to the MoGFSS to address cases of VAC and GBV. Through this additional technical support, UNICEF has assisted the 33 case managers in the capital and 50 staff from the Family and Children Service Centers spread across the 19 atolls to improve response to VAC and provide essential services such as MHPSS.

COVID-19 CONTEXT

The impact of COVID-19 in the Maldives goes far beyond the immediate health risks to the population and effects on the health system; they also include impacts on livelihoods and wellbeing. Prior to COVID-19, a vast section of the country’s economy relied on tourism and related business. The halt of international tourism produced an unprecedented economic shock that has had devastating impacts, including an increase in general insecurity and loss of family incomes. This was felt even more among families residing in rented housing in the capital Malé and has created environments with high levels of stress and heightened existing vulnerabilities such as domestic violence. As a result, risk factors behind children’s experiences of violence and/or witnessing of violence at home have increased.

The Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services (MoGFSS) reported 1,113 cases of sexual violence against children, of which 73% of victims were girls, in the three years leading up to June 2020. The COVID-19 crisis heightened the risks of violence and between February and July 2020, the MoGFSS registered 755

cases of gender-based violence (GBV), domestic violence and violence against children (VAC), showing a significant increase compared to the previous years. Experiences of violence result in negative mental health outcomes that impact an individual's mental health and wellbeing.

This case study outlines the technical support UNICEF has provided to MoGFSS to enhance response to and prevention of both VAC and GBV.

DETAILS OF PROMISING PRACTICE/ CRITICAL POINT OF CHANGE

While the Government of Maldives in partnership with UNICEF has made remarkable efforts to prevent VAC, sexual violence against girls and women is still a deep concern. The *National Study on Violence against Children in the Maldives* (Engelhardt & Jayasuriya, 2009) showed that 15% of children attending secondary school had experienced sexual abuse at least once in their lifetime.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed critical gaps in the social service system. For instance, despite significant progress to enhance national hotlines, the COVID -19 crisis resulted in disruptions, primarily the hotline being flooded with calls about the lockdown.

In follow-up to a comprehensive Gender Programme Review, UNICEF has been supporting the MoGFSS to design and launch the national campaign "Breaking the silence about violence". It aims to: (1) mobilise the entire society for the prevention of sexual violence, protect those who are vulnerable to sexual violence, (2) immediate reporting of suspected sexual violence, and change social norms around victim blaming, (3) increase capacity to provide services to survivors and (4) ensure fast track justice for the victims.

The campaign is ongoing and comprises a multilevel strategy that aims to have a meaningful impact on reducing violence against children and women:

- At a societal level it aims to create a caring community where violence is considered a crime

and the survivors and families are supported rather than shamed;

- At an institutional level, it proposes training of frontline workers so that they are equipped with information on available GBV response services and referral procedures to support GBV survivors.
- At school level, it proposes activities to empower girls and boys to speak out against sexual violence and engage them to be leaders for change;
- The campaign also proposes working with religious leaders to enhance their public engagement and awareness-raising on the seriousness of sexual violence against children and women in Islam;
- With civil society, it plans to initiate CSO-led survivor support services to fill the existing government gaps in service provision.

In addition to launching this suite of preventative interventions, UNICEF has also been contributing to the rollout of interventions to strengthen the capacity of institutions and developing resources to ensure survivor's access to child protection services. Increased attention is also being paid to strengthening mental health support and services.

For example, UNICEF has provided technical assistance to MoGFSS to develop national Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for responding to sexual and gender-based violence. In support of the MoGFSS's work to strengthen the social work service, UNICEF has hired a (virtual) trained supervisor to sit within the social work team to provide supervision and build the capacity of key staff.

Through this additional technical support, UNICEF has assisted 33 case managers in Malé, and 50 staff from the Family and Children Service Centers spread across the 19 atolls with additional MHPSS and VAC service response support.

LESSONS LEARNED FOR CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS

COVID-19 has brought into focus remaining vulnerabilities and gaps in the child protection system. However, it has also shown opportunities to enhance the system. Key lessons learned include:

- **Social mobilisation which demanded protection for children and support for survivors was important for ensuring political buy-in for systems change.** Before the pandemic, communities were mobilising and questioning the gaps in the system. Community mobilisation resumed with news of increased GBV cases, after the lockdown eased. In response, the President met with institutions and survivors of GBV to analyse the best ways to guarantee protection and access to justice for survivors.
- **Developing SOPs for responding to sexual violence has been essential for aligning and strengthening the role of different actors in responding to GBV.** For example, providing linkages between social workers and teachers, as well as the justice system was important.

LESSONS LEARNED FOR PARTNERSHIPS: COOPERATION, COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION

- **The relationship of trust between government institutions, development partners like UNICEF and other stakeholders, contributed to strengthening partnerships and leveraging joint resources.**
- **UNICEF's ability to establish synergies among various actors and promote collaborative efforts has played an important role.** Consultations supported by UNICEF, with civil society and government partners were organised and as a result, critical inputs, partnership, and commitment to the national campaign was defined from key stakeholders for managing and responding to sexual violence against children and women. Therefore the multi-sectoral prevention and response system will continue to be strengthened.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND QUESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND FUTURE ADAPTATION

- **Sustained support for the *Breaking the Silence Campaign* will mobilise communities** to prevent GBV and safely refer survivors to services and promote positive mental health.
- The Maldives enacted the Child Rights Protection Act in 2019. **Working towards the full implementation of this law** will contribute significantly to the work to end VAC in the country.
- **Allocation of government resources can increase much needed human resources to improve case management and services for survivors.** Systems strengthening will need to include steps to promote comprehensive strategies to respond to the immediate needs and long-term plans to secure the needed human resources for operationalising an efficient child protection system.
- **More collaborations between child protection and health and the education sectors are needed.** These sectors have demonstrated quick responses during COVID-19 and provide essential components to help enhance multi-sector linkages to the child protection system.
- **Strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations (CSO) to expand services including legal guidance and assistance as well as mental health and psychosocial support.** Due to the dispersed nature of the country, strengthening the capacity of CSOs is essential to expand access to services across the islands.

KEY CONTACTS AND FURTHER RESOURCES:

For more information visit:

UNICEF Maldives Country Office website at
<https://www.unicef.org/maldives/>

REFERENCES:

Engelhardt, K & D. Jayasuriya, National Study on Violence against Children in the Maldives, UNICEF, Malé, 2009.

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