Thank you, Mr Chairperson,

Today, women constitute half the global population, yet only 21% feature in national parliaments. Girls are as educated as boys at the primary level, yet all around the world, women only hold 40% of wage earning jobs in the non-agricultural sector. Around the globe, women, both young and old are proving themselves as capable, hardworking and determined citizens, yet they continue to be denied opportunities and suppressed in many spheres, whether deliberate or resulting from long-standing discriminatory practices and cultural norms. And as a result, gender equality has remained a persistent and an enduring social ill contributing to a loss in human development.

Mr Chairperson,

Gender equality is an issue that is close to our hearts. It was one of the key priority areas for the Maldives throughout our term on the United Nations Human Rights Council, and it will continue to be one of our flagship issues when, with your help, we get elected to a new term this November.

Women’s rights are central to human rights. That is why we supported at the Human Rights Council, the setting up of the “Working Group on the Discrimination of women in law and practice”. That is why we became a member of the Executive Board of UN-Women last year. That is why we ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1993, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention in 2006.

The Maldives has done remarkably well on several indicators related to gender parity. The Maldives ranked 64th out of 147 countries on the gender inequality index of the 2013 Human Development Report. We are on track for Millennium Development Goal 3 on promoting gender equality. The Maldives has achieved gender parity in both primary and secondary education. Maternal mortality rates are at 60 per 100,000 live births, 99% receive prenatal care and skilled health staff attends 98% of births. Maldives has never had gender discrimination in wages either in the public or private sector. Women face no de-jure discrimination in access to employment, education and other public services.

The Maldives Constitution of 2008, guarantees every person the same rights and freedoms, and upholds the principles of equality and non-discrimination. The recent domestic violence law that was passed last year provides legal provisions to protect victims from domestic abuse through protective orders and improved monitoring mechanisms. Half a dozen additional laws have...
provided more avenues for the equal participation of women in political, economic and socio-economic services.

However, Maldives cannot afford to be complacent as there is much that needs to be improved. Among the bills yet to be passed are the Sexual Harassment Bill, the Human Trafficking and People Smuggling Bill, and the Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code; all key pieces of legislature that will provide victims of abuse with more legal powers to face their abusers.

Mr Chairperson,

Unfortunately, women still face de-facto discrimination. This comes in the form of obstacles to gaining access to tertiary education opportunities, participation in the employment market, and surpassing traditional family roles that would restrict personal and professional advancement. Conservative religious interpretations that have recently manifested in Maldivian society have introduced new practices such as under-aged marriages, non-vaccination of infants and decreased school enrolment rates of children, with specific detrimental implications for the girl child. These same interpretations have placed new obstacles to women’s participation in the public sphere, through defining women’s roles as solely domestic.

As the democratic reform process gained momentum, the government in 2006 sought to analyse the situation of violence against women in Maldives. A nation-wide survey produced results that shocked the national consciousness. The results showed that one in three women between the age of 15 and 49 had suffered from physical, sexual or emotional violence, over the course of their lives. One in nine reported suffering from severe violence. One in six women in the national capital Male’, the capital and one in eight countrywide reported experiencing childhood sexual abuse under 15 years old. The majority of the perpetrators were identified as immediate family members challenging the notion that the home is a safe place for women.

Violence against women destabilizes society. It distorts traditional norms and entrenches archaic values that feed into a tide of cultural beliefs and attitudes that condone such behaviour. A clear indicator of this trend is that 30% of women in a survey conducted by the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives in 2012 thought that it was justifiable for husbands to beat them if they lapsed in their household chores.

For these trends to reverse, more efforts need to be put in to change perceptions about violence against women. The Government, in partnership with international agencies, has developed programs to raise awareness on gender-based violence, develop social support and counselling, provide women with legal options, and advise them on economic opportunities that would empower them to leave abusive relationships. The Family Protection Unit of the Police force stands today as vigilant sentry to respond to our most needy. A Family and Child Services Centre is now operational in every atoll to coordinate protection and counselling of victims.

Mr Chairperson,

Women need to take control of their own destiny, their own lives, to make things better for themselves. This unequivocally means women having more say in the decision making process of their countries. In the Maldives, regardless of the gains women have made in terms of education and employment, women remain significantly under-represented in the political sphere and governance. The proportion of women in parliament is 6.4%, compared to 21.4% globally. Only 7.8% out of the total 2754 candidates who ran in the first-ever local council’s election in
the Maldives were women. And out of 942 seats, only 5.3% went to women. No woman has ever run for President in the Maldives.

Democracy cannot be fully realized without the equal participation of women at all levels of government. Thus, gender equality remains a key priority for the democratic consolidation process in the Maldives. We, as a nation, are committed to moving forward, to creating both public and private space for the development, advancement, and empowerment of women in our society.

Mr Chairperson,

On Friday, we marked the international day of the girl child. Yet if we allow things to continue as they are, we will present the girl child of today a bleak future in her maturity tomorrow.

International initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals have given women hope. They have resulted in women achieving the basics. But this is just a beginning. Women need and deserve so much more! The ultimate goal is, and should be equality. This is why Maldives joins UN Women’s call to include a stand-alone goal on achieving gender equality, women’s rights and women’s empowerment in the post 2015 Development Agenda.

Gender equality is not an impossible dream. We can only achieve it through partnerships, at the international, regional, national and above all, at personal level. We invite all the men to walk by our side and help us to achieve our shared goal of gender equality, for a more equitable and a just world.

Thank you