EXTREMISM AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN SOUTH ASIA

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Azra Naseem

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Dr Azra Naseem is an independent researcher whose work focuses on Maldivian socio-political affairs. She has published widely on how the recently acquired predominance of ultra-conservative Islamic ideologies is revolutionising Maldivian religious practices and people's lived experiences.

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Azra Naseem

It is August 2020 and the world is in the grips of a global pandemic. It is an abnormal time in human social history. Isolation is the norm and law.

In a remote island in the Maldives, Haneefa[1]—a divorced mother of three—decides to re-marry and begin a new life. She moves to her new husband Ahmed's[2] island with her daughters who are ten, seven and four.[3]

Maldives has one of the most dispersed populations in the world. It is customary for newlyweds to settle down in the home island of one of the spouses. These island communities are small—most have a population of less than 2,000. By necessity and character, they are tight-knit communities. Here, persuasive ideologies take hold of the collective imagination with ease.

When Haneefa arrives on Ahmed's island, she doesn't know all the islanders are in thrall of a faith healer. "Rugya Shafiu", as islanders call him, is a travelling *Rugya* practitioner. He specialises in Islamic Exorcism. Across the country, people are queueing up for his charms. They believe in him so much that one of them gives Shafiu his entire life-savings. He believes Shafiu's diagnosis—a *Jinni* put stones in his kidney.

Haneefa has her own illness. She suffers from migraines. The episodes are hard to manage. She needs to be alone in a dark room. She needs quiet. She is irritable, ultra-sensitive. Ahmed refuses to believe Haneefa's symptoms arise from a headache, awful as it may be. He has no doubt that she is possessed by a *Jinn*.

Like other islanders, Ahmed turns to Shafiu in his time of difficulty. Shafiu immediately recommends *Rugya*. Thus begins two months of torture and terror for Haneefa and her three daughters.

Shafiu's exorcism of Haneefa requires touching her, performing non-consensual sexual acts on her. It calls for debasing her dignity. It needs keeping her in captivity, chained to furniture. It involves physical abuse. It demands rape. Ultimately, it also needs the sexual and physical abuse of her young children. All with her husband's consent—in his presence and in his absence. He is complicit, he is an accomplice.

No one comes to Haneefa's help.[4] Her screams go unheeded. A doctor who sees her notices nothing untoward. Authorities—even when summoned—fail to act. No one wants to interfere in a “domestic issue”. What a man does to his wife is his right. No one wants to intervene in a “religious practise”. What religion says to do is right to do.

Haneefa's story is exceptionally horrific but by no means the exception. Gender-based violence—overwhelmingly committed by men against women—is widespread and on

the rise in the Maldives. Every month in the first half of 2022, the Gender Ministry received an average of 44 complaints of gender-based violence.[5] They included rape, physical violence and abuse, sexual violence and abuse, emotional and verbal abuse, controlling behaviour, intimidation and withholding/damage to property.

This paper explores connections between gender-based violence and religious extremism in the Maldives. A study that establishes a direct correlation between the two in the context of Maldives does not yet exist. But research has been done in other parts of the world that links the two directly.

Monash University and UN Women published a study in October 2019, for example, which identified "hostile sexist attitudes toward women and support for violence against women" to be the factors most strongly linked to support for violent extremism. Misogyny, the report found, is "integral to the ideology, political identity, and political economy of current violent extremist groups."[6]

The last two decades has seen an astonishing increase in the support for violent religious extremism in the Maldives. Maldivian Jihadists have been actively killing others for being "un-Islamic" at both home and abroad. In 2012, a prominent religious cleric and MP, Afrasheem Ali was almost decapitated outside his home for his religious views, deemed to be "too moderate". In 2014, a journalist, Ahmed Rilwan was kidnapped and as discovered years later, decapitated at sea. He was also murdered for his "un-Islamic" views. In 2017 another outspoken critic of ultra-conservative Islamism, Yameen Rasheed, was also stabbed to death outside his home. Meanwhile, hundreds of Maldivians are being hounded out of society for various religious, gender-based "crimes" such as homosexuality and being transgender.

As the statistical reports of the Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services show, gender-based violence remains rife across the country.

This paper asserts that the rise in violent extremism in society and the widespread adoption of ultra-conservative religious beliefs are connected. Conservative interpretations of Islam are being used to permit violent behaviour towards women and provide men with the impunity to do so.

As evidence for the assertion, this paper examines influential social discourses that use religion to "bless" gender inequality and the subjugation of women while allowing men to behave with impunity, creating an environment conducive to increasingly brutal violence against women.

Research shows that those who support violence against women— "that is, who think that men ought to be able to use violence against women"—are three times more likely to support violent extremism."[7] As discussed in detail later, it is common for both Maldivian men and women to believe there are circumstances under which a man can justifiably hit a woman. It is also common for Maldivian men and women to support violent extremism in the name of religion.

To show the link between the two, this paper analyses three sets of discourses related to women and their status in society—parliamentary debates on women's emancipation, official *fatwas* on women and clerical utterances on women.

These discourses both produce and are produced by societal attitudes towards a given subject during a particular period of time. Analysing what the political/religious readers have to say/are allowed to say on the subject of women and their empowerment—keeping in mind the context of rising religious conservatism—allows connections between conservative religious ideologies, violent extremism and gender-based violence to be brought to the surface.

RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM IN THE MALDIVES

The first democratic Constitution of the Maldives adopted in 2008 forbid citizens from believing in any religion other than Islam.[8] Consequently, it has become the norm for Maldivian politicians to frequently and loudly assert that Maldives is a "100 percent Muslim country".

Maldives adopted Islam as its official religion in 1153 AD. During the several hundred years in which the small island nation remained isolated, it evolved into an almost syncretic religion rooted in a combination of the country's long Buddhist history, early Islamic teachings from Arabia and the small-island lifestyle of its population. Maldivians believed in Islam as a matter of personal faith, requiring little clerical guidance or government intervention. In their isolation, Maldivians remained sheltered from the many divisions within Islam that continued to cause conflict and violence in various regions of the world.

Things began to change towards the end of the 20th century. Having opened up to the world via tourism in 1972, outside influences hit the country like an avalanche. Radio and television, tourists, a British education system, high literacy rates and international development aid brought dramatic changes to the lifestyles of Maldivians.

Maumoon Abdul Gayoom—who was President of the Maldives from 1978-2008—conducted an intense nationwide campaign of Islamisation. A graduate of Egypt's Azhar University, his goal was partly to counter Western influences, and partly to use Islam as a tool to strengthen his own power. He appointed himself the supreme authority on all religious matters. He also banned the practice of any other religion and severely punished the rare citizen who abandoned their faith. Consequently, religious differences among Maldivians were unheard of. The entire population—almost without exception—still regarded religion to be a personal matter. Moreover, Gayoom had zero tolerance for any religious practices—even from within Islam—that he disagreed with.

Religious extremism entered Maldivian society at the same time as political extremism. The Maldivian democracy movement—which began at the turn of the century—rose against the extreme brutality of Gayoom's regime. State violence against citizens had become rife towards the end of the president's long rule. The Maldivian population at the time was among the most peaceful in the world. But Gayoom's regime was brutal. Allegations of torture in jail abounded. Gayoom tolerated neither criticism nor

disobedience. Nor did he tolerate any challenges to the existing "religious harmony" for which he took credit.

Towards the end of the 1990s, conservative Islamic ideologies began circulating among Maldivians. Conservative religious missionary work began as a fringe movement instigated by Maldivians returning with religious education from Pakistan, India, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia. Gayoom moved swiftly to remove their influence in society. As a dictator, he banned their preaching, missionary work, even their talking about religion.[9] He began jailing those who professed or preached Wahhabism. Reports say he tortured many clerics and other leaders of the movement in prison.[10]

It is here in prison, among the hundreds of political prisoners, thousands of imprisoned heroin addicts, petty thieves and religious conservatives that the Maldivian democracy movement was born.[11] After years of agitation—when the democracy movement finally succeeded—the relationship between violence, religious extremism and democratic politics had already been set in motion.

The 2008 Constitution states that MPs and Presidents must be Sunni Muslims. It forbids any citizen from leaving Islam. It allows civil and political rights only as far as they do not violate a tenet of Islam. Prior to the democracy movement, the Constitution contained no such clauses.

In the years that followed, Islamists played a far bigger role than ever envisaged in Maldivian politics and society. Now that they were in a democracy, clerical figures began their missionary and recruitment activities with unprecedented freedom. In 2009—less than a year into democracy—news broke of a Maldivian suicide bomber attacking the Inter-Service Intelligence Directorate headquarters in Lahore, Pakistan.[12] Ultra-conservative Islam was no longer a fringe movement in the Maldives, and it was expanding fast.

Within politics, the Islamist Adhaalath Party entered into a coalition with the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) leading to the establishment of an Islamic Ministry to regulate people's faith and "defend Islam in the Maldives". Under their leadership, Islamic affairs became political affairs and vice versa.

Accusations of being "un-Islamic" soon became the most pejorative term to use against political rivals. MDP and its leader, Mohamed Nasheed, became the most high-profile victim of such labelling. In February 2012, his government—the first democratic one in the Maldives—fell two years before completing its term.[13] Much of his departure and MDP's failure to remain in government can be related to the influence of conservative religious leaders. Both in and out of government they mobilised against Nasheed as an "un-Islamic" ruler unfit to govern a Muslim country.[14]

Since then, conservative religious thinking has had an upper hand in Maldivian society. Their impact on women's development and society's attitudes towards gender is underestimated and understudied. As the number of Maldivian men who returned from Islamic schools abroad with the mission to invite their fellow citizens to embrace "The Call"

and adopt conservative Islam increased, so did the number of Maldivian women who followed their teachings.

The UN Gender Inequality Index shows that for ten years (1995-2005), Maldivian women made rapid and steady progress towards gender equality. But from 2005 onwards, progress turned into stagnation.[15] A significant event preceding the pattern of stagnation was the December 2004 tsunami. The destruction it brought in its wake had an enormous impact on the national psyche.[16] Islamists took full advantage of the situation to depict the tsunami as god's wrath wreaked upon the people for not following "the right Islam", i.e., Wahhabi, Salafi and other ultra-conservative interpretations of the religion.

The first democratic government's premature end in February 2012 ushered in a decade of violence, political and religious extremism and social chaos. With the judiciary and law enforcement in turmoil, gang warfare, armed robberies and random street violence became the norm.[17]

Islamists were quick to blame democracy for the instability. They believed that a system of governance which relies on the rule of manmade law over god's law (*Shari'a*) cannot be appropriate for a "100% Muslim country". Consequently, Maldivians voted for Abdulla Yameen, the least democratic figure to contest the 2013 election. He set in motion a period of authoritarian reversal during which democratic principles—including gender equality—took a backseat. Having succeeded in the election with the help of Islamists, President Yameen—just like his predecessor—allowed Islamists to spread their ideology nationwide, unfettered by necessary restraints.[18]

Ultra-conservative Islamic beliefs do not always lead to violence. But violent Islamist extremists almost always have an ultra-conservative religious background. In 2014, when ISIS established a caliphate in Syria and Iraq, Maldives became the second largest supplier of foreign fighters per capita to the conflict.[19]

Maldivian Jihadis had come to regard the country as a land of *shirk* in thrall to "infidel" Western ideologies. They travelled to "The Levant" with the dream of living in a pure Islamic State, and many took their "good wives" with them. Islamist publications in the Maldives during this time included instructions on how to be a "good Jihadi wife", emphasising their role in the conflict as complementary to the brave men giving their lives to "defending Islam". To this day, many Maldivian women remain stranded in refugee camps of Syria and Iraq, awaiting repatriation.[20]

Islamists see women as complementary to men. Their role is to stay at home and raise their children to be "good Muslims". They must be modest and pious. If they do go out to work, they must stick to certain jobs seen as appropriate for women. They must, at all times, be protected by a man. They must be "good wives" to their husbands and "good mothers" to their sons.

Maldivian Islamists spread these messages across the country using every media platform available. Websites and other publications aimed at women, such as *Muslim Sisters* mushroomed, packed with advice for women such as "How to Be Good".[21]

The complete change in Maldivian women's perception of themselves and their role in society can be observed in the sartorial revolution of the last decade. Almost all of them have adopted the headscarf, and a significant number of them embrace the long, black robes worn by women in ultra-conservative Islamic states.[22]

Before modern Islamist influence, Maldivian women were marching forward on their path to progress and found gender equality an attractive goal. Today, most of them are convinced that their success lies in pleasing their men as god instructed, and that equality with men is not what god intended.[23]

Women, Democracy and Islamism

While ancient history shows that Maldives was a matriarchal society in which several powerful monarchs were women, for most of its modern history, Maldives has been a largely patriarchal society. Men have been widely accepted as naturally superior to women. Despite such beliefs, modern Maldivian history also shows a country which—at the end of the 20th century—looked as if it was making far more progress towards gender equality than some of its South Asian neighbours. In 2007, a year before Maldives adopted democracy, Maldivian women were considered "among the most emancipated in South Asia and the Islamic world."[24] In an assessment of gender and development in the Maldives, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) noted that, "Women in the Maldives operate without the secondary burdens of class, caste, race or *purdah* faced by their sisters in nearby countries. Men and women socialize freely; can expect equal pay, equal access to education and to live to about the same age. There is no detectable gender preference for male children or parental bias in the nutrition or education of children."[25]

For a country which had existed in virtual isolation until the 1970s and thus arrived late to the development party, the future looked feminist. However, the UN Gender Inequality Index (GII) shows that while Maldives made significant gains between 1995 and 2005—GII value fell from 0.6 to 0.4—the decades since have seen little progress. This lack of advancement in gender equality is astounding given the legal and institutional support women have been provided with during those years.[26]

For instance, the country has a sophisticated network of laws, institutions and regulations geared towards offering protection for victims of gender-based violence. Aligning itself with the international community on gender equality, the Maldives ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993 and signed its Optional Protocol in 2006. The Domestic Violence Prevention Act (DVPA), 2012 facilitated the establishment of a Family Protection Authority (FPA), a case referral and monitoring protocol and two Domestic Violence Prevention Strategic Plans.

All 19 administrative atolls of the country now have Family and Strategic Services Centres. Shelters have been set up for survivors of violence; social workers, police and courts are trained to implement the DVPA. A "Health Sector Response to Gender-based Violence" was introduced in 2016. In 2014, the Sexual Offences Act was passed to provide protection to children and adults from all forms of sexual violence, including harassment at work and in public places. The Gender Equality Act (Law Number 18/2016) was enacted in

August 2016, prohibiting gender-based discrimination. Meanwhile, strict legal measures requiring Supreme Court approval are in place to prevent the marriage of minors. The Maldivian Government has assured the international community that it is committed to "eliminating traditional gender stereotyping and bias at all fronts." [27]

Given the institutional and legal support available to Maldivian women, what happened in the early 2000s to restrict their progress? Many suspect conservative Islam is the reason. Fear of Islamist retaliation, however, prevents such research, which has the potential to fall under the broad category of "un-Islamic activities". This can lead to criminalisation of the research and punishment—even murder—of researchers. Despite the official reluctance to fully unpack the complexities of the Islamist influence on Maldivian women's empowerment, authorities are not unaware that ultra-conservative religious teachings are having a negative impact on women's status and equality. In a report to the UN, for example, the government also alluded to religious conservatism as one of the impediments to women's empowerment. [28]

Conservative factions continue to push back on the gains made in gender equality. Using social media, they have at times incorrectly "interpreted" Maldivian culture and Islamic principles in a manner which hinders the advancement of women and girls' rights, and at times specifically endorsed practices such as child marriage.

To highlight the role Islamists are playing in the regression of the rights of Maldivian women is not to say that sexism and misogyny were not obstacles to women's equality prior to the recent wave of radical Islamisation. Sexism has been a part of Maldivian women's experience for centuries, so has gender-based violence. A 2017 survey by the World Bank revealed that 22% of Maldivian women believed there are circumstances in which their husbands can justifiably hit them. "Disobedience" is one such reason. What the Islamists have done is to harden such attitudes, and convince women—with support from selective *Hadith* and Quranic verses—that women and men can never be equal. This conviction is obvious in recent responses to a parliamentary inquiry into the reasons for prevailing gender discrimination. 76% of participants said, for example, that the social perception of males as superior to females is the main reason for acts of discrimination against women. Inequality begins at home from birth, when baby boys are treated differently from girls, who are generally taught to defer to boys as their superior.[29]

Islamist discourses strengthen these convictions. It encourages women to obey their husbands at all costs. They make vehement arguments against laws that protect women. The government's bid to criminalise marital rape was finally successful in December 2021, which angered religious clerics who argued and mobilised against the legislation as "un-Islamic".[30]

Maldivian religious clerics are tech-savvy. They use social media to advocate against the rights of women, for their subjugation and for violence against them. They encourage polygamy and persuade parents that their daughters should be "married off" at puberty. They encourage girls to limit their education to "womanly pursuits" and they make modesty and piety the bywords of their existence. Most of all, they demand a woman's absolute obedience to man as her father, brother, husband and son.[31]

Herein lies the obstruction to women's empowerment in the Maldives, and the increasing violence against them by men. Conservative Islam provides men with permission—a blessing of sorts—to believe they are superior to women. The biggest success for Islamists has been convincing women of the same "truth".

In the space created by the conviction of man's god-given superiority, gender-based violence against women becomes not just acceptable but as a just consequence of women's failure to be "sufficiently" Islamic. Several high-profile cases involving gender-based violence in recent history support this idea.

In December 2019 it emerged that a violent extremist arrested by the police—33-year-old Ismail Hammadh—was the husband of a 16-year-old minor girl who was pregnant with his child at the time. They had got married when she was 13. Further investigation revealed that Hammadh was a member of an ultra-religious community, living separately from the rest of the small population on the island of Maduvvari in Raa Atoll.

As investigators waded further into the case, they found that it was the girl's second "marriage". It had been formalised by her parents, also members of the same ultra-religious community as Hammadh.[32] Media reports revealed that authorities had known about the minor girl's circumstances. After investigating previous allegations of abuse against the girl, the Gender Ministry still returned her to her parents where she went on to suffer much greater abuse. Religious conservatives are rarely punished for such practices since holding them accountable is labelled "un-Islamic".

Mariyam Nazaha, 22, from the capital island of Male' silently suffered domestic violence from her husband for ten years before one afternoon, on 22 June 2010, she stabbed him to death in their home. She denied premeditated murder but the courts refused to admit her ex-husband's brutality in her defence. After one of the fastest murder trials in the history of the country, she was sentenced to life imprisonment and two months of fasting as repentance.[33]

None of the courts allowed her husband's violence to be presented as evidence in her defence. "No one listened to her side of the story", Nazaha's lawyer said at a Supreme Court hearing in 2021.[34] That the courts were unwilling to admit evidence of how a man beat his wife for ten years when she stood to be jailed for his murder shows the impunity men enjoy for such behaviour.

In December 2015, Ziyadha Naeem, 37, from the island of Thinadhoo in Gaafu Dhaalu Atoll was hospitalised after her estranged husband violently raped her with a sharp implement. A mother of three children, Ziyadha kept the rape and her injuries secret until she was forced to seek medical help. She was flown to Male' for treatment but died of her injuries a few days later. Her husband was arrested and charged the same month. On 20 March 2019, he was acquitted of all charges—marital rape, manslaughter, negligent homicide and possession of pornography.[35] In a landmark decision that bucks the trend of allowing domestic violence perpetrators to walk free, the High Court found him guilty of marital rape in October 2020.[36]

One conviction, however high profile, is an insufficient deterrent in the face of a pattern of impunity. On 7 August 2022, a man brutally murdered 22-year-old Shiau Mohamed Saeed in his apartment. He also mutilated her body, forcing forensic officers to carry parts of her body in separate body-bags. It is the most violent murder of a woman in the history of the country.[37] After a public outcry against the murder, there appears to be a media blackout on the case. Facts surrounding this latest murder of a woman by a man maybe hidden, but what is clear is that gender-based violence in the Maldives is not only increasing, it is also becoming more brutal.

SEXIST DISCOURSES AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Although Maldivian gender laws can be seen as progressive in many aspects, their passage through Parliament has often been paved with rampant sexism. Several parliamentary debates have shone light on this fact in recent years. One of the most revealing debates occurred in March 2016, when members of the People's Majlis met to debate MP Rozaina Adam's proposal to allocate one seat from all local councils to a woman. MP Riyaz Rasheed was adamantly against any female quota, arguing that such a move violated the gender equality assured to men by the Constitution. He imagined a future in which men would turn around *en masse* and ask how the current MPs could have allowed such an atrocity against them. The presence of five women (out of a total of 89 members) in Parliament was evidence, he said, that gender equality has already been achieved, making the Bill unnecessary.

Tellingly, it was not simply those who were against gender quotas that held such convictions. MP Moosa Manik supported the Bill, describing himself as someone who "always works very hard to provide opportunities for women." As an example, MP Manik elaborated on "the respect with which we treat our wives." His views echo often in Maldivian gender discourses. "We accept they [women] do a lot to care for and raise our children, and they sacrifice a lot. It is the ladies at home who do all that while we are outside working." He warned his fellow MPs not to criticise and belittle female MPs during the debate, or they could end up insulting women in general. The Bill had his support, but it was transactional:

> We [men] are willing to extend you the esteem and respect which the Bill proposes. But women have to prove yourselves. It is our fervent wish that you refrain from falling in love with the home help and other such things, and that you spend your lives loving us, being loyal to us, and respecting us.

Out of 60 members present at the Majlis, the majority voted against the proposal. The most common argument made by MPs was that these additional rights—be it a seat reserved in the local council or divorce—would be re-cast as "anti-Islamic" and perceived as a threat to men's rights and their masculinities.

That women are the "weaker" sex who cannot function properly without the protection and guidance of a man, that women's rights can only be obtained when a man agrees to bestow them out of his own largesse, (ab)using Islam to deny women's demands

for equality—these perceptions, which are shared by politicians at the top and men and women at the grassroot level—form a widespread opposition to gender equality throughout Maldivian society. As discussed before, gender inequality is one of the key determinants of conflict and chaos within a society. Gender-based violence, in turn, is common in environments of such inequality. As previously discussed, the most common trait among violent extremists is their proclivity towards violence against women. Fundamentalist interpretations of women's rights—both in general and within Islam—have become deep-rooted within Maldivian discourses on gender equality, directing the debate away from universal rights for women towards women's rights as defined by *Shari'a*.

Fatwas: the last word on women, by men

The Supreme Council for Fatwa was established in the Maldives in 2016 to provide guidance in controversial religious issues and for *Fiqh* research and learning. Since then it has worked hard to make itself a part of the nation's decision-making mechanism, issuing fatwas on a large number of women's issues, especially on their status and conduct.

Of 40 fatwas published in two years (between 25 April 2010 and 14 March 2022), eight were on issues specifically related to women. They ranged from abortion and miscarriage to whether a menstruating woman can enter a mosque, whether DNA tests can be used to prove paternity when it is being contested[38] to whether it is necessary for women to cover their faces.[39]

In September 2019 the Maldives government announced the appointment of two women, Aishath Shujune Ahmed and Ezmiralda Zahir, to the Supreme Court bench. The move delighted women's rights activists and outraged fundamentalist religious clerics in equal measure.[40] Women's rights NGO, Uthema lauded the appointment as a key moment in Maldivian efforts to achieve gender equality while religious organisations cried foul. The Fatwa Council had attempted to prevent the move by issuing a pre-emptive *fatwa* in July 2019. The statement provided three perspectives from different Islamic schools of thought:

- women cannot be allowed to be judges
- women can be allowed to be judges under limited circumstances and only to decide on certain types of "womanly" cases
- women are allowed to be judges in all cases without exemption

Out of the three options—all based on varying but equally valid interpretations—the Maldives Fatwa Council said it agreed with the first option.[41] In 2011, the Council also ruled that women should not be allowed to officiate marriage ceremonies.[42] In 2021 the Fatwa Majlis was asked to share its opinion on Female Genital Mutilation, or "Female Circumcision", as practitioners insist on calling the act. Their answer is still pending, as if the issue is a grey area.

CLERICS AND THE CLITORIS: JUSTIFYING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE WITH RELIGION

A nationwide network of conservative religious clerics has established themselves on a large variety of platforms, both online and offline. Maldives is one of South Asia's most

well-connected populations in terms of smartphone and internet access and usage. Over 80% of Maldivians are reported to have an online presence. Religious clerics who have established themselves on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Telegram and Viber have tens of thousands of followers. Among the most famous is Dr Iyaz, who runs a Viber group called 'Islamic Knowledge Q&A'. In the group, he provides religious guidance on subjects ranging from how to behave during periods to pleasing husbands in bed.

Dr Iyaz's explicit entrance into the sex lives of women is testament to the remarkable impact of ultra-conservative male religious clerics on the lived experiences of Maldivian women. In 2018, he was asked if a husband having sexual intercourse with his wife without her consent can be considered a rapist. Dr Iyaz stated that that marital rape is not possible given that it is the wife's duty to fulfil the needs of a husband.[43] In January 2014, when the Sexual Offences Act was going through Parliament, he condemned the legislation for conditionally criminalising marital rape, calling on the MPs who voted for the legislation to "repent". Dr Iyaz was, at the time, the Vice President of the Maldives Fiqh Academy. Quoting a *Hadith* (sayings attributed to Prophet Muhammad), he said a woman should respond to her husband "even if she was at the kitchen stove".[44] Dr Iyaz raised the issue again in 2018, declaring that a husband forcing his wife to have sex with him cannot be considered rape,[45] although he later apologised in the face of public outrage.[46]

The need for a "good wife" to obey her husband is not new to Maldivian culture. A 2007 study showed that over half of the female population of Maldives (58.2%) agree they are obliged to have sex with their husbands even if they do not want to. Over 29% thought it acceptable for a husband to beat his wife for refusing to have sex with him.[47] Despite the prevalence of such thinking, it was only in the last decade—when ultra-conservative religious ideologies began to spread across the Maldives—that gender-based violence such as marital rape and FGM began to be publicly justified by religious leaders. The positions Dr Iyaz continues to hold—Vice President, *Fiqh* Academy and senior academician at the Maldives National University—is evidence of widespread approval of his ideas.

Dr Iyaz had previously been in the news for his advocacy of FGM, a practice which, while not unknown to the Maldives, was not widely practiced or openly encouraged until recently.[48] In January 2020 he posted on Facebook, "If a girl has not been circumcised, can she be considered to have reached puberty?"[49] In his post, Dr Iyaz sought to portray FGM as an act required by Islam.[50] He wrote that while FGM is not obligatory for women, it is recommended for them. Religious conservatives have attempted to make the issue of FGM more official by getting the Health Protection Agency to seek a fatwa from the Supreme Council.

On 23 June 2021, Dr Iyaz tweeted an article titled 'Medical benefits of female circumcision'.[51] The article lists several benefits of FGM and quotes "a female gynaecologist's opinion" that one of the main benefits is that it "takes away excessive libido from women." The public outcry from non-conservatives and women's rights advocates led to the issue being debated in Majlis. Dr Iyaz remained silent for three days before tweeting that he had merely linked an academic article on the subject.

MP Mickail Naseem (MDP) called for his removal from the Maldives University and for an investigation by the Parliamentary Committee on Gender and Human Rights. Within days it also emerged that the Supreme Council was considering the matter and would soon be publishing a fatwa. The Ministry of Health announced it needed a second opinion to decide on the issue, evoking public outrage.[52]

That the matter is still up for debate is a clear indicator of the power and influence over policy—especially when it comes to women—held by men, especially male religious leaders. Meanwhile, clerics have begun discussing what FGM is and how it can be done "correctly". The debate shifted from whether or not families and medical professionals should perform FGM to the line between mutilation and "circumcision". Dr Iyaz did not get many retweets; an indication of how little support there currently is in mainstream Maldivian society for FGM. If conservative clerics succeed in making the matter about committing "a religious deed", support for it is likely to grow in the Maldives' increasingly conservative society. In early August 2022, the Maldives National University reinstated Dr Iyaz as a lecturer.[53]

Conclusion

Gender-based violence is rife in modern Maldives and is becoming increasingly brutal. So is religious conservatism and violent extremism. Research conducted in other parts of the world has shown a direct correlation between support for violence against women and support for violent extremism. Studies conducted in Indonesia, Bangladesh and the Philippines showed, for example, that people who think men ought to be able to use violence against women are "three times more likely to support violent extremism".[54]

Support for both violence against women and for violent extremism is strong in the Maldives. Proving a direct correlation between religious extremism and gender-based violence in the Maldives would require a more in-depth analysis of religious discourses, as well as of women's attitudes towards Islam. Such a study must also qualitatively and quantitatively measure the extent to which Maldivian women have internalised conservative clerical views viz-a-viz their own views on their identity and roles.

This report contributes to existing research on gender-based violence and violent extremism by showing how conservative religious teachings often supply justification for perpetrators of gender-based violence, giving them moral—and often, legal—impunity. While this study offers no conclusions, it provides a point of departure for further research into connections manifest between gender-based violence and violent extremism in the Maldives.

End Notes

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