

Women's rights advocates agree that wife beating and other forms of violence are not widespread. There are no firm data on the extent of violence against women because of the value attached to privacy in this conservative society. In 1997 the Government commissioned a study by a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) on domestic violence, but it was never completed. Police officials report that they receive few complaints of assaults against women. Rape and other violent crimes against women are extremely rare. None were reported or prosecuted during the year. Under Shari'a the penalty would be flogging, banishment, or imprisonment for up to 5 years.

Women traditionally have played a subordinate role in society, although they now participate in public life in growing numbers and gradually are participating at higher levels. Women constitute 38 percent of government employees, and about 10 percent of uniformed NSS personnel. Well-educated women maintain that cultural norms, not the law, inhibit women's education and career choices. In many instances, education for girls is curtailed after the seventh grade, largely because parents do not allow girls to leave their home island for an island having a secondary school. Nonetheless, women enjoy a higher literacy rate (98 percent) than men (96 percent). Due largely to orthodox Islamic training, there is a strong strain of conservative sentiment—especially among small businessmen and residents of the outer islands—that opposes an active role for women outside the home. However, the Government continued legal literacy programs to make women aware of their legal rights and workshops on gender and political awareness in the outer atolls. The Government also has built 10 of 15 planned women's centers in the atolls, which are facilities where family health workers can provide medical services. The centers also provide libraries and space for meetings and other activities with a focus of the development of women.

Under Islamic practice, husbands may divorce their wives more easily than vice versa, absent any mutual agreement to divorce. Islamic law also governs interstate inheritance, granting male heirs twice the share of female heirs. A woman's testimony is equal to only one-half of that of a man in matters involving adultery, finance, and inheritance. Women who work for wages receive pay equal to that of men in the same positions.

In October the Cabinet replaced the National Women's Council with a Gender Equality Council to serve as an advisory body to the Government to help strengthen the role of women in society and to help ensure equal participation by women in the country's development. Also during the year, the Government, with the assistance of the European Union and the U.N. Population Fund, expanded a program of small loans to women for development projects to additional islands. 🇻🇹