Exploring the Masquerade of Equality: A Preliminary Study of Pink Politics in Maldives

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Abstract: The female voice in Maldives politics is devolving into a feeble mumble. A seemingly progressive society shows their implicit disdain for the female voice in politics with their votes. Despite years of observations by national or international organisations, a satisfactory answer why this remains recurrent is yet to be discovered. A democracy survey by Transparency Maldives indicates that the public seems to be aware of the falling numbers of Maldivian women elected in politics and have a variety of their own opinions regarding its causes. Exploring this subject is a measure to find out the in-depth reasons why the Maldivian society is indirectly rejecting women in politics. Hence, this study sought out responses that go beyond the surface to find clarity on what needs to change according to the voters themselves in the light of examining even one possibility that would make society more accepting and prepared to elect female politicians. To uncover the truth, this study utilised a focused ethnography approach using a social constructivist paradigm to study the narratives of a selected group of women over a period to ascertain why there is a deceptive treatment of equality when it comes to women and how this pretence impacts women's role in society.

Keywords: Women, gender, equality, ethnography, social constructivist paradigm, politics

Introduction

During the elections for Maldives' Parliament members in 2019, only 4 out of the 87 elected were women (People's Majlis, 2021). This reflects one of the lowest numbers of women in Parliament from recent times. In May of the very same year, quotas were proposed to be introduced for political party positions. The public were quick to scrutinise this discussion and let their dismay over "inequality" be expressed.

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Questions over what equality truly meant and where women belonged in the political arena were discussed. Nonetheless, the following December, the Parliament approved a 33% quota for women on island councils. In 2021, the very first voting with such quotas in place were carried out, resulting in one of the first gender-neutral committees of its kind.

Before the occurrences of 2019, Transparency Maldives held two consecutive democratic surveys and published their results from 2013 and 2015. Another similar report titled *Women's Empowerment in Political Processes in the Maldives* by The International Federation for Electoral Services was also published in 2014. These three documents will provide this study's historical parallel to study the phenomena, where women are still disregarded in the political sphere, even with active rebuttals to change the status quo in a progressive society.

The issue plaguing a country that actively searches for ways to achieve gender equality becomes apparent in its failure for fair representation in the political sphere. Maldives is categorised as one of the two countries in South Asia that has high human development (Human Development Reports, 2021). Despite indicators acting as proof of progress, expanding opinions beyond cultural barriers and gender biases, the society remains archaic with its views of women in the upper hierarchy of politics. What is noted here echoes the fact that there is still, to some degree, interlocking of gender beliefs and capabilities, an argument put forward by Guna Saigaran (2022), when the issue of deprivation is discussed. The concern remains how a society, which largely claims to not discriminate women in politics, would not demonstrate it in their actions and why, when asked their opinion about women historically getting lesser votes, many attribute it to the society not wanting women as political leaders (Sharma & Zahir, 2015). Understanding the nuances for this blanket statement can potentially uncover why the Maldivian society contends that it does not want elected women politicians. The misidentification of this issue will reduce equality in politics, leaving half of the population represented poorly, and in return, passing of laws that largely disregard the female perspective which furthers the inequality between sexes.

Moreover, disregarding the female perspective can slow down progress as women play invisible yet important roles in upholding a society's progressive pace. Unequal politics is rife with a diverse array of problems that can impact any and every member of society. Thus, it is necessary to uncover why gender equality in politics is generally accepted, but representation remans poor and why society can accept women in other facets of society but not the upper tiers. Identification of the causes for this predicament can be a step in the right direction to achieve gender equality in politics. The study also puts spotlight into the possible hypocrisy regarding this crisis and encourages difficult, yet important conversations. In return, help female politicians gain more insights into the unidentified hurdles and how they can overcome them.

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Literature Review

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The literature review of any study is the extension to the main body of inquiry. The literature review compiled for the study attempts to analyse the status quo. Firstly, by giving a brief historical context, followed by a few prior research already concluded and its methodological analysis. The thematic lens of women empowerment in the current day will be included as well. This is also where gaps can be identified to reach some understanding in the journey of unveiling the masquerade of inclusivity in politics.

The Historical Background to The Current Situation at Hand

The conversations of quotas to lessen the tyrannical majority's grip on lowering the number of female politicians in elected political positions began as far back as the early 2010s. John Stuart Mill pushed into mainstream popularity the term "tyranny of the majority" in his 1859 magnum opus, *On Liberty*. The term, in the sense of "social tyranny", is an encompassment of majority rulings that disproportionately and unfairly treats a minority (Mill, 1913). During the 2013 Presidential Term, the diminishing representation of women in parliament, cabinet and other upper policy making tiers of politics started to signify a bigger problem in poor equality and the conversations to remedy this predicament began. The rate of male politicians overpowering and reducing space for female politicians were worrying to many citizens, both in and out of politics.

Nonetheless, the term ended in 2018 while the conversations for remedies were ongoing and the initial discussion to apply quotas on parliament members came to a screeching halt. In the 2019 elections for parliament members, only 4 out of the 87 elected were women (People's Majlis, 2021). In the previous term, only 5 women were elected. The current consensus is that the Maldivian parliament has the lowest number of women members history has ever seen. As proof, in the conclusive statistics, the number of women in the Maldivian parliament was revealed to be 6.5% in 2009, falling to 5.9% by 2013 and falling further to 4.5% in 2018 (People's Majlis, 2021). The tyranny of majority (Mill, 1913) towards an entire half of the population being apparent and unavoidable, the government took the matter into their own hands. During the final quarter of 2019 parliament hearings, a massive overhaul of amendments to the Decentralisation Act was brought up and voted in favour. The aforementioned bill dedicates an entire section in order to enact a quota policy for the local women's committees and councillor committees (Bill on amendment to the Decentralization Act (No. 7/2010), 2019). According to the chapter, the authority of women in councils must be ironclad on paper to guarantee city councils and island councils are run with women's contribution and in which, it is protected as well. Despite merely being a political history recanting, the fact that the issues regarding low turnout for elected female politicians go hand in hand with the

policies and their history remains an important reminder to keep moving forward to achieve equal visibility in politics.

The Methodological Background to The Current Situation at Hand

The signification of the worries that this study focuses on was partially brought into the attention of policy makers with the precedence of a few important studies. These include two researches by a local body in Maldives called Transparency Maldives. Transparency Maldives carried out two consecutive democratic surveys in 2013 and 2015 and published the respective reports, *Democracy at Crossroads* in 2013 and *A Throttled Future for Democracy* in 2015. The third study, from an international body, The International Federation for Electoral Services, was published as *Women's Empowerment in Political Processes in the Maldives* in 2014. According to the report *Democracy at Crossroads* by Transparency Maldives (Nevitte, 2013), for the local elections of 2011, the number of female voters were higher compared to men — an anomaly compared to the traditional voter turnout pattern. It serves as an indicator to Maldivian women's higher interest, knowledge, and participation in politics. However, gender disparity, in the usual way, was discovered in the very same report; around two- thirds of the population did not support gender equality. Support for gender equality was as low as 38% and women themselves contributed to this low number as more women were likely to reject gender equality (Transparency Maldives, 2013).

Another notable finding is that 73% of the participants agreed that individuals should blame themselves for their own failings, and not society (Transparency Maldives, 2013). It is to be noted that this survey was carried out during a time of political uneasiness and immense cynicism. The general consensus was that the biggest issue facing the country as of then was political issues, which 77% of participants agreed with (Transparency Maldives, 2013).

Fast forward to a few years into 2015, Transparency Maldives replicated the democracy survey and published the findings in *A Throttled Future for Democracy*. The findings show that the consensus towards gender equality has increased, compared to the prior study, to 46%. The recent study also addressed the question of whether society is open to accepting women in upper hierarchies of political power. Interestingly, 84% of participants supported female elected parliament members, and 79% supported the idea of female cabinet ministers. However, the high number of support given for the prior two high-ranking authority did not extend towards the role of female judges, female Vice Presidency nor Presidency of the Country, with only 39% of Maldivians supporting the possibility of women contesting and getting elected as the President of the country (Sharma & Zahir, 2015).

Another notable conclusion of the study is how nearly half of the participants were willing to consider both male and female candidates for presidency, without

discrimination. The remainder chose with a bias towards men by 26% or 28% towards women (Sharma & Zahir, 2015). The report, *Women's Empowerment in the Political Process of Maldives*, by International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) in 2014 uncovered further findings and put some solutions on the table to empower women in politics (Ritchie et al., 2014). It also highlighted how Maldives failed to fully honour their CEDAW commitment with the objection to allow women candidates for Presidency. While the findings showed the number of women politicians contending and getting elected to leadership roles were low, the level of participation at the grassroots levels was high.

The factors determined in the study are financial constraints, gender roles and stereotypes as well as the lack of legal rights that contribute to the disempowerment of women. Plus, the incidences of silent erasure of women in public spaces were also highlighted. The report then goes on to include potential remedies in the likes of structural reforms, gender sensitisation and encouragement of women's participation at every level. As well as a discussion with the main political parties of Maldives to consider the levels of participation and contribution by women and recommendations for the parties themselves to promote greater participation from women.

Women Empowerment Mechanisms in Place

Women have been powerful, vocal participants in the very fabric of Maldivian society since prehistoric times. Even after the nationwide conversion to Islam, aplenty female rulers, *raskamanaa*, graced upon the royal throne. However, with the gradual shift to a more socially accepted Islamic way of living, women have been discreetly side-lined with their achievements and contributions to the lower tiers of the political echelon. Jannat and Letchamanan (2022) described that these sorts of social stigma not only affect women in general, but also the well-being of their daughters and their offspring. The spill-over effect is manifold with women at the losing end. To change the narrative of a history converting to a time where women are absent from the higher tables of political discussion, initiative are being made in different levels of authority.

In May 2019, the amendment to the Decentralisation Act clearly states that women will form 33% leadership of local council boards (Bill on amendment to the Decentralization Act No. 7/2010, 2019). The amendment includes the further possibility of its extension being put forward to political parties and soon the parliament as well. In 2021, the country saw the application of this amended bill. The very first elections with guaranteed slots allocated for women candidates in the voting sheets were carried out and in turn, created the first deliberately gender-neutral committee of its kind. In a newly decentralising Maldives, women are now guaranteed their seats in local councils while their authority and responsibilities are protected.

Aside from policy reforms giving leverage to the political scene to empower women, the groundwork is also being laid down by the grassroots movements. One of the notable organisations at the forefront is United Nations Development Program (UNDP). With Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved by 2030, the organisation places a high priority on achieving goal number 5, gender equality and goal number 10, reducing inequality (United Nations, 2021). With these two SDGs in mind, multiple trainings have been conducted over the years to encourage and equip women with the necessary skills to uplift them from the grassroots levels and propel them forward into the policy making level. One of the notable training courses conducted by UNDP in 2020 for women was political empowerment to build their political leadership skills. A total of 108 female candidates from three atolls, contesting for the local councils and Women's Development Committee took part in this vital stepping stone.

A non-profit organisation that has been active since 2010, to advocate gender equality is Hope for Women (HFW). HFW which initially started out to create awareness about and minimise gender violence, has since evolved to become a partner in uplifting women in societal participation. Gender equality and women's human rights is an important objective of HFW (Hope for Women, 2021). Aside from publishing reports and studies, HFW has been conducting trainings over the broad issues of gender inequality and remains an important stakeholder in policy making discussions. Another NGO that contributes to empowerment of women in politics directly is Women in Democracy (WD). WD consists of experts in the field of gender studies and aims to provide a platform to foster conversations between youth and political affluents. The goal is to inspire the future generation of political leaders and provide meaningful exchange of experiences between the participants. WD conducts weekly sessions of this nature with guest speakers.

The findings and compilation in the section regarding the history, studies and implementation of change comes with a grain of salt. These studies are outdated and need to be replicated in the near future to identify a potential trend or pattern and to understand the significance of certain political activities that contribute to the general consensus of opinions, especially with regard to equality. Another shortcoming is the inadequate data that has been collected specifically about women and politics, as two out of the three reports addressed gender equality in politics under a much broader umbrella of politics. The lack of importance given to the scientific investigation of gender exclusiveness in politics due to societal activity leaves the question of how to remedy it effectively, undecided.

With little information available, the nuance factors leading to declining female politicians in Maldives is left to speculation. As a result, the preparation and deliverance of awareness programmes and education to change may end up not as effective as expected and the levels of empowerment the grassroots' and NGOs' hope

to achieve may fall short. Thus, proper resource utilisation, contingency planning and even policy level discussions need to be backed with timely accurate data to make the appropriate decisions to empower women.

Methodology

This study is guided by the principles of social constructivism. Social constructivism, as described by Vygotsky in 1978, is the vital building block to the actualisation of being. He elaborates the input given by the community to "making meaning" for the development of individuals. The environment in which one grows up is the determining contributor to thought processes and mechanisms. Therefore, the commerce of buildable, socially constituted knowledge over time is the creator of opinion. Being so, this study utilised the collective interactions of its participants via a focus group discussion to arrive at some narratives that shed some light on women's place in politics and society in the Maldivian context.

Data Gathering Method

The data gathering method applied in this study closely followed the framework set by Gubrium and Holstein (2008). Narrative ethnography requires participants to contribute data in the form of stories, their lived realities. In addition, due to the nature of ethnography, it is important the participant pool has some cultural relevancy that they all share. This allows the data compilation to be capable of interpretations, with regard to common denominators between the participants from the same culture (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008).

Data was converted from conversations held over the span of over three weeks, in three different settings. The interview was a conversation mainly led by the participants with a few cues thrown in by the interviewer to gauge responses. The interviewer fed key terms in questions to find the understanding behind the rationale of the research participants. The purpose of this method of conversation is for the participants to deliver authentic responses while they take the lead in the conversations. With the tail-end of the pandemic still in play, interview sessions were conducted online via video calls. Picture cues were also used to measure visceral reactions as well.

Participants

Participants came on board the study on a voluntary basis. The participants of this study were of legal voting age and had participated in casting their votes in at least one election. The age group ranged from 25 years to 35 years. To obtain more trustworthy narratives, both genders were represented. The vitality of including one participant from each gender was to find the cues from conversations that could highlight differences in perspectives due to gender itself. The requirement of having

cast votes in an election before was to collect data about those experiences that can influence the study also. The varying ages was another indicator when compiling data to understand generational differences. Intersectionality is an unavoidable elephant in the room when addressing social phenomenon and its documentation since each person is made up of different experiences, not one is the exact same, resulting in a spectrum of experiences that are equally valid, despite being so different (Crenshaw, 1989).

Phases and Interview Questions

The interviews were informal and conversational in nature in order to elicit stories that were rich and thick in descriptions during the video calls. There were ground rules which were aligned to the ethical considerations as stipulated in the next section. The first phase of the study was an introductory phase that attempted to uncover the background and lived experiences of the participants. This type of questioning which corresponds with Gubrium and Holstein's (2008) situational terrain brings to the fore the environment and context the participants are in. It enables the researcher to grasp the setting and motivation for actions and so on. The second phase attempted to uncover the interactional terrains of the participants. Questions were geared towards eliciting narratives that brought to the fore social and cultural roles, performativity and the like. The idea was to draw a linkage between what is happening inside the story and what is happening outside the story.

The third phase of data collection spotlighted opinions, values, and feelings of the participants. This type of questioning allowed us to gather an understanding of what the participants consider are the impacts and their personal feelings regarding the matter. After the interviews were conducted, the participants' responses were transcribed and documented. Further analysis was performed to categorise their responses into categories. This process was performed using a Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) strategy and responses were categorised via coding. Through a rigorous and reiterative coding process, themes emerged that helped the authors determine some preliminary findings about the masquerade of equality with regard to women politics in Maldives.

Ethical Considerations

Simply put, ethical considerations are the moral bindings of good or bad which must be prioritised in the setting of interviews. The considerations of priority are of heated debate but one rule of thumb that can be followed in the nature of internet-led research are the five principles of ethical consideration (Sharf, 1999). Sharf advocated that the basic etiquette depends on five vital clauses that need to addressed, starting with the planning phase and throughout the duration of study involving the

participant. Adherence to these principles are vital as the interviewer is dealing with another human being and as such, their well-being must be respected. To begin with, the participation throughout the study must be voluntary. The following five clauses are the principles with their description.

i. Before beginning the primary data collection from the participants directly, contemplation must be given to the intent of the research being conducted and whether it triggers any conflict or harmful outcome.

ii. With the initial commencement of data collection, the participants must be given a brief thorough introduction to the study they are contributing to, as well as fine-tuned details of the process as necessary. Above all, a clear self-introduction should be given as well.

iii. With clauses (i) and (ii) entailing the considerations given and verbal details, it is important for the two clauses to be documented on paper. It is also on this paper that the rights of the participant are detailed and protected with words. Both the participant and interviewer need to legally sign the consent form to proceed with the utmost clarity.

iv. The conversations that will be held after fulfilling the above clauses must be carried out with the same level of consideration and importance. It is vital to remain conscious of the information the participant is giving and to keep the conversation open. This enables a more wholesome collection of information as well.

v. Finally, respectful boundaries must be maintained. It is important to value confidentiality and trust the participant is voluntarily delegating to the study. Thus, healthy boundaries must be practiced keeping up with professionalism and to maintain the validity of the study.

Findings and Discussion

Consensus on the Masquerade of Equality for Women

The emphasis on the term masquerade comes from the possibility of politics being intersectionalised based on gender. The intersectionality, which is under the magnifying glass here, looks into how existing structures of society deliberately create divides between the demographics, especially between genders (Robinson, 2018). Although surveys and its consequent studies showed a gradual positive outlook towards women's participation in politics that could dissolve political stratification, there is a misconnect when it comes to electoral politics. The existence of this masquerade of equality was acknowledged by all the participants. Albeit on different tangents, it can be thematised under the "pink political masquerade of equality", which refers to the pretence of society's gender inclusivity that leads to the covert

marginalisation of women in the political arena. This is also where the authority of pink politics comes into play — there is an illusion of fairness in politics but the structures remain heavily patriarchal in practice.

Legal Gender Blindness

During the first phase, participants offered their initial narrative of why they think this study is important: "*From about what I understand, it [the study] is about the difference in perspective men and women have navigating their day to day lives. Especially in the political fields and even business environment, basically anything to do with the glass ceiling that women have to break through to be able to compete on the same level men… it is an important thing we need to talk about*". The legal gender blindness narrative was further emphasised in an entirely separate week regarding society's reaction to inequality in politics: "*Yes obviously, there is only 3 MP's [3 female member of parliament] right now, people have to be blind not to see it[inequality], but they would see that the laws are in place and everything looks good on paper but implementing it hard or say women don't come forward without looking into why they don't*".

The initial response unearthed a new angle to the discussion and the second response gives it more relevance. The responses reflect an amalgamation of two theories — one of gender blindness and the other of legal blindness. Gender blindness is the implicit rejection to acknowledge the different lived realities of men and women (Dharmapuri, 2017). Which is rife with the unlikeliness for genders to experience life, in general, equally due to their unparalleled physiological, psychological, and situational needs. Whereas legal blindness is when there is a bare minimum of light that can enter the eye to see some shapes or form while not absolutely rejecting light. With both phenomena combined, one sociological and the other biological, legal gender blindness refers to the ability of vaguely viewing the plight of gender stratification, yet the inability to make enough sense of its true shape, to tackle inequality fittingly.

This is one way the perception of lived realities is keeping up the faux veil of equality which the masses are greatly aware to a certain degree but are unable to remove. Throughout the interviews, both participants apologetically acknowledged the self-awareness of society to the inequality that causes poor representation of women in politics as well as society, regardless of their gender. Thus, legal gender blindness maintains an illusion of equality, with self-awareness, policies and laws while being unable to properly implement actual equality.

Exclusive Tea Party Society

The second participant went into great details about the so-called "tea party" of political affiliations in Maldives. It was confidently coined as such due to the prevalence of political representations being confined to closely knit political families who frequently

gather together for informal family occasions. In the Maldives, it seems to be traceable to one big family. This particularly family is big enough that each affluent politician can be gathered in one evening, at a tea party on the terrace of one house. A great majority of women currently active in elected political positions have a family connection or a family-like connection to this exclusive club. The narrative of political tea parties was an accidental stumble, which was elaborated when asked: "*I think the family matters, more than gender I think the biggest discriminating factor is who you know, who you are connected to… If you look at the evening tea of one these house's you will see the president's lawyer, the tourism minister, the police commissioner, his wife, all of these people having tea together… All of them can have tea together in one house, because they are all related one way or the other*". Therefore, whatever little female representation in politics there is, comes from an exclusive club where family and connections are the determining factors to opportunity. This also upholds the masquerade of equality as while equal opportunity for all women from different backgrounds and socioeconomic situation is touted, in reality, there is implicit discrimination against them with more opportunities for non-political "tea party" members.

Other participants proceeded to use another example akin to a tea party instead, "*That's the club you can't get in*". The tea party indirectly bars women hailing from different levels of social stratification.

Stratification demonstrates that society is categorised according to socioeconomic factors, in this case, socioeconomic classes (Saunders, 1990). When men themselves are unable to infiltrate nor overcome the exclusion of the informal association of political tea parties, it is twice as hard and even downright impossible for a woman who is not connected. Moreover, the prevalence of the tea party of political association adds another layer to the masquerade of equality, vanity politics. Participant one titled them as "token women". The general narrative between participants agreed that there were three or four reasons as to why people may go into politics, for either power, wealth or change. The tea party members have all but one of those reasons achieved. Hence, women from elite families fill the political positions under the guise of more representation while not being able to nor allowed to attempt meaningful change.

Ingrained Religious Stigma

The participants mentioned in nearly all the discussions about the untouchable "religious police". It should be noted that there is no such formal religious police force in the Maldives. Despite this, being first mentioned in passing, the so-called "religious police" was deemed to have played a great hand in the determination of lowering the playing field for women's role in society. In the local context of Maldives, the "religious police" refers to a subgroup of society, with purely voluntary self-assigned roles of subconscious religious monitoring. This religious policing makes

Maldives lean towards being more conservative and in turn, impacts how women are perceived. People are resistant to adapt to the new modern thinking stemming from old roots where "more women are more out there"; that is, the public is reluctant to accept greater female representation in the political sphere. The manner in which the religious policing by society operates to put up a greater masquerade is given in the following narrative: "*A religious police would go harder after a woman rather than a man, she has a lot to lose, her family especially… A women's action weighs more in society and she is forgiven less than a man*". The term "religious police" is informal slang, which in hindsight, is recognisable as religious stigma. Putting liberty and freedom on a loose leash, is nonetheless a restrictive binding.

The idea of forgoing political participation is turned into a gendered issue where women have no place in. It then becomes a divine, undebatable, and untouchable one-way conversation. The "religious police" strengthen gender-based roles and gender biases to the extent which the following response shows: "*Some of my very conservative friends they do not like women being too out there so they wouldn't vote for a woman*". The extent of which the religious policing is inadvertently changing the tide of political equality for genders impact the perception of women voters as well. The success can be attributed to the high levels of participation of women in grassroots and in voter turnout statistics. A new reality for the definition of equality is being put forth by the quasi-religious police. Interaction of these Islamic polices in society effectively clouds the definition of equality and further pull the masquerade up higher when all multiple realities exist with some truth to them.

The Implication of The Masquerade of Equality for Women

The mere existence of pink politics suggests the political field portrays inclusivity while actively side-lining women's participation, and thus their role in society. There is a multitude of impacts that the masquerade of equality brings onto the roles of women in society. For example, social pressures of how women should be, look, wear, see and so on gets dictated under the guise of being deemed a "socially correct" woman, as participant two put it, to avoid the scrutiny of the religious police and even the public. Further, the existence of pink politics and the masquerade of equality is heavily redefining the roles of women in society. In a society tilted favourably towards men and their perceptions, the unjustness towards the way women are treated in such societies is a definition of feminism (Gamble, 2010). One participant shared the constructed reality built around the barriers to feminism: "…*I've heard about feminism, where only elite people get a chance to be on top, and these people are considered men, and they make men with hype positions without really giving a lot of equality to grassroots women*".

The definition provided by the second participant adds to the understanding of the impacts on women's role in society. Women end up operating the lower tiers of political authority without any financial aid.

Policies Without Fairness

The participants also held a similar narrative towards the necessity of women in politics: "*…of course they are necessary, because if all the men make decisions that govern the lives of women and their children it's going to be very representative of how they live... especially in regards to health and education I think women have a lot of points to say about how these things have to be done so I think they should have a say*". Similarly, another participant contended: "*women are half the population if we don't understand their perspective then how we are going to talk about important issues they need to be part of every conversation regardless of what the conversation is.*" The narratives were clear and in agreement. However, both participants answered with a resonating and confident "no" when asked whether they are active in politics. This could be a sign of the implicit bystander effect (Garcia et al., 2002).

The implicit bystander effect takes place when individuals shrug off social responsibilities, not out of malice, but out of the assumption that their fellow bystander would intervene before they would. A similar effect is taking place in Maldivian politics. Women are hesitant to enter politics out of fear of the religious police, political tea party exclusions and the like, as well as being under the impression that another woman could step into the role much fittingly. However, this is not the case as everyone is holding a similar sentiment and ends up waiting for the other to take the first step indefinitely.

This inevitably leads to an unequal representation of women in politics where the dialogues of pivotal policy making lacks the voice of one half of the population. The smaller number of women in the upper echelons of politics is perpetuating cruelty and negligence towards women. As seen in history with the staggeringly few women in the parliaments and cabinets resulting in unkind behaviour towards women, even in these spaces — the incident of MP Ahmed Nihan spitting water at MP Romania Adam being one of them.

The Scapegoat of Media

The role of women can be boiled down to another avenue of commodified amusement. Women as benefactors of pink politics fulfilling vanity political posts is a narrative often implied by the media. One participant stated, "*Media is wilfully very dismissive of women*". Erasure of women's achievement by burying their names behind the male member of society they have some connection to, is becoming a common occurrence. The narrative of media's representation of women are along the lines of media being highly unethical to the point of sacrificing a female politician's personal life, well-being and security. Names are omitted or a woman's own accomplishments are downplayed as not their own, but attributed to their male family members instead. Years of media practice of exploiting women as entertainment has contributed to the

shifting of the public's perception of women. The media is habituated to passive aggressive reporting while the public is accustomed to being consumers of the by-products of these reports (Berger & Luckmann, 1991).

The media has also made it a habit to give greater coverage to a woman's mistake, even if it is minor or insignificant. By putting personal life on display, and close scrutiny of personal choices of clothing as well as opinions, the role of women in society is effectively boiled down to a nameless being, available for entertainment at their expense.

Conclusion

The research pinpoints forms of gender blindness and exclusive "tea party society" as evidence of a masquerade of equality. These factors are able to manipulate the role of women in society as a result of policies that are not comprehensive and thorough. The reason as to why society believes there is equality or legal gender blindness, is also greatly in part due to the impacts of pink politics. The second factor contributing to the change of women's roles in society is the years of biased media reporting, specifically at the cost of women without impunity, instead of identifying the causes of the diminishing number of female representations in politics, despite a seemingly open and modern society. The potential of this study comes in angles that have yet to be studied in detail as much as the gaps that have been bridged.

Years of discriminatory coverage on media have also disenfranchised women. Women are often the scapegoats for political mishaps, and their character and private life are put under unjust scrutiny in the public eye. This makes it harder for women to have a fair representation in elected positions of power.

As the research suggests, the masquerade of equality is maintained by gender blindness and the "tea party society". The impact that these factors have had on policy cannot be understated. It is difficult to have meaningful conversations, and even harder to bring about effective change, without considering how pink politics, legal gender blindness, the secretive societies of politically fuelled "tea parties" and religious policing have impacted the public.

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