

# Challenges and approaches for Agenda 2030: Perspectives of persons with disabilities in a small island context

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*The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was adopted with the intent of bringing about a paradigm shift in the way the general population perceives disability. The paper reports the findings of a qualitative inquiry that used a phenomenological approach to discuss the social grievances of persons with disabilities from a human rights-based perspective and in the context of the middle-income small island nation of The Maldives. Fifteen participants with disabilities, as well as carers and parents of children with disabilities, took part in the study. The findings indicated that the environment is physically disabling, and opportunities for participation, including access to quality education, and social protection for people with disabilities, are limited. The findings speak to the need for a shift in the social view that persons with disabilities are dependants to enabling human diversity and facilitating the capabilities of persons with disability, their dignity and meaningful engagement in society. The paper concludes there is a need to explore further approaches to encouraging a shift in society and using a human rights approach to social protection to make progress towards the Leave No One Behind Agenda of 2030.*

*Keywords: Disabilities, Agenda 2030, Sustainable Developmental Goals, Inclusion, Human Rights Approach, Social Protection, Maldives*

## INTRODUCTION

Agenda 2030 of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) calls for an inclusive approach to development with a Leave No One Behind (LNOB) emphasis, particularly focusing on vulnerable groups, including Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2019). The SDGs embody human rights principles as realised in various international conventions, including the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*. Brolan (2016) notes that PwDs need to vigilantly monitor the extent of their inclusion as countries implement the development agenda. This paper explores the grievances of PwDs living in The Maldives in the context of the country's attempts to fulfil its obligations to *CRPD* and the LNOB agenda of the SDGs.

### **Conceptualising disabilities**

Approaches to studying PwDs have evolved from medical to social and, recently, cultural and human rights models (Degener, 2016; Marks, 1997). While the medical model viewed disabilities solely as a health condition, the social model conceptualises disability as an outcome of society's perceptions and behaviour to adapt to different needs and provide inclusion opportunities (Hashemi et al., 2017). Lang (2001) noted that the social model is a "complex construction that intersects multiple approaches" to understand the notion of disablement. Retief and Letšosa (2018) suggested that the social model significantly shaped social policy in many countries. Devlieger (2005) proposed expanding the social model, suggesting that the community's identity, culture, and worldviews are integral to understanding disabilities. Brewer (2012) constructed an identity model that conceptualised disability as allowing for establishing an identity that emphasises affirmation, confidence and pride among PwDs.

Mitra (2006) suggested that Sen's (1985) capability approach is best suited to exploring the concept of disability, where the focus is on what PwDs can do, thereby expanding the horizons of the social model. A more recent construction of disability that closely ties in with the social model is the human rights approach. Degener (2016) wrote that the social model is constructed through a lens of exclusion and oppression associated with a disability and proposed the Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA) with human dignity at the core of conceptualising disabilities. The HRBA is a paradigm shift to a moral values worldview of "disabilities as part of human diversity" (Degener, 2016). Such a conceptualisation paves the way for advocating for policy action in countries to protect rights as stipulated in the *CRPD*.

In this study, we adopt the Human-Rights Based Framework (HRBF) outlined by Sepúlveda et al. (2012), which identifies 13 principles impacting the social protection of PwDs. Our study focuses on the eight principles most closely aligned with our findings, comprising the inclusion of vulnerable groups, the universality of protection, dignity and autonomy, comprehensive and coordinated policies, accountability and effective remedies, adequacy of benefits, standards for accessibility, adaptability, acceptability, and meaningful, effective participation. By focusing on these principles, we aimed to provide a targeted exploration closely aligned with the core aspects of our research findings.

### **Disability and inclusive development**

*CRPD* (article 32) identified the need to make development inclusive and requires the cooperation of development partners to achieve this cause (Grech & Soldatic, 2016). Albert and Harrison (2006) argued that associating poverty with disability limits the optimum examination of the drivers that exclude PwDs. They argued that PwDs should instead be viewed in terms of enhancing their contribution to development through social participation. Grech & Soldatic (2016) support this view, criticising the generalisation of disability in the poverty and development discourse.

As the debate on poverty and disability unfolded, the conceptualisation of development through a human rights approach has gained momentum for inclusive development consistent with the HRBA to disability. It offers a platform for social transformation and economic development that paves the way for enhancing human dignity for PwDs (Albert, 2006). However, Katsui et al. (2014) observed that the HRBA to development also suffers from excluding PwDs. Grech and Soldatic (2016) support this observation, noting that while there is considerable rhetoric on the HRBA to development by governments and development partners, there is negligible inclusion of PwDs as development subjects.

### Research context

The research was conducted in the small island country of Maldives, a middle-income country with a population of 568,362 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The Maldives enjoyed steady growth in its economy, with a GDP growth rate of 7.8% in July 2019 and 8.7% in January 2020; however, with the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, its economy contracted to 5.9% in the first quarter of 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in 2019 in China, impacted countries worldwide as they grappled with the numerous challenges of protecting their citizens and responding to the consequences of multiple lockdowns of the global economy and their education systems (Fikuree et al., 2021). Despite economic development in Maldives, inequalities continue to exist. Twenty-eight percent of Maldivians are multidimensionally poor, with 13% living in the capital city Male' and 87% on other islands in the atolls (National Bureau of Statistics, United Nations Children's Fund, Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, 2019).

Maldives ratified the *CRDP* on 05 April 2010, and the *National Law Act 08/2010* came into force on 08 July 2010 (Presidents Office, 2010), showcasing political commitment to protect the rights of PwDs. The legislation sets out government and state mandates to promote, protect, and ensure full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all PwDs and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.

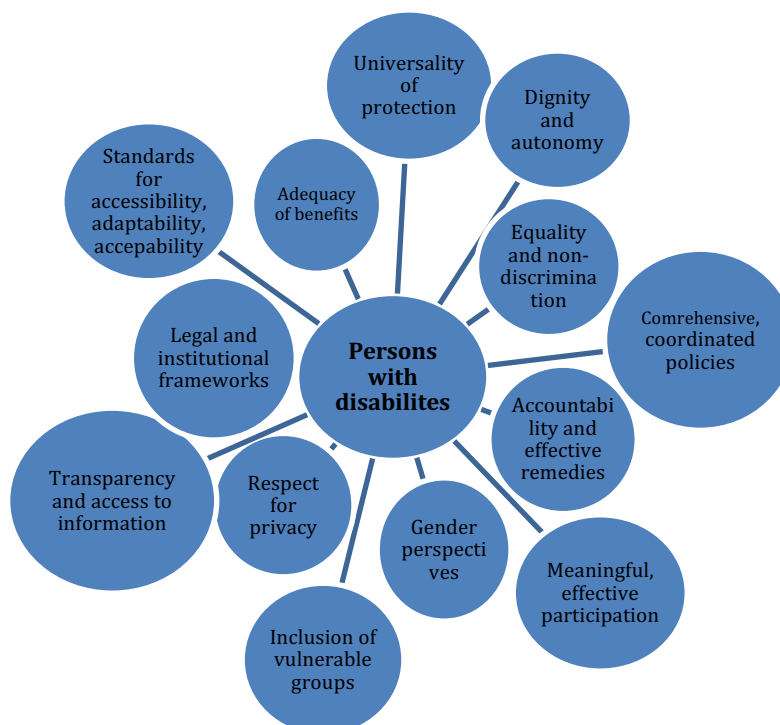
PwDs have increased from 6.8% of the population in 2017 (Banks et al., 2020) to 9.2% in 2019 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020) and is expected to further increase with the projected increase in elderly population in the Maldives unless there are concrete policies and interventions to reduce disabilities across the country. Disability prevalence reported in 2019 is higher in the atolls (10.8%) compared to Male', the capital city of the Maldives (7.5%), with increases in the prevalence of disability with age, from 4.2% in the 18-35 years age group (4.7% among women 3.6% among men) to 11.7% in 35-64 age group (14.6% among women and 8.2% among men) to 45.4% in 65 and older age groups (50.3% among women and 40.5% among men). Note that the gender difference exists in all adult age groups (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

Data from other low- and middle-income countries or small island developing states provides more meaning to the Maldives statistics. The disability prevalence rate in Fiji is approximately 13.7% (UNESCAP, 2018); in Mauritius, it is 3.75% (UN DESA, 2019), and in Seychelles it is 4.24% (Esparon, 2023). Comparing Maldives statistics on disability with larger low- and middle-income countries like India or Indonesia further highlights the unique challenges faced by smaller island states. The Indian Census 2011 showed that the disability prevalence rate in India is approximately 2.2% (Office of the Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, 2021), while in Indonesia, it is estimated to be around 9% (Gunawan & Rezki, 2022). In high-income countries like Australia, the disability prevalence rate is approximately 17.7% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

Despite the Maldives' commitment to *CRDP* and efforts to provide social protection, the population is concerned with the lack of access to education for PwDs and discrimination against them (HRCM, 2020). After a decade of state commitment to *CRPD* and five years after pledging to implement Agenda 2030, the disability prevalence, with its differences by gender, location and age, points to the intersecting vulnerabilities of PwDs. In our study, we uncover significant challenges within the education system that directly impact the capabilities and opportunities for PwDs in our small island context. These challenges include limited access to basic education, inadequate support for special education needs and a lack of vocational training opportunities.

### **Conceptual framework**

We conceptualised PwDs broadly in this research, taking an HRBA approach that recognises disabilities as part of human diversity (Degener, 2016) and the capabilities of PwDs when the principles of human rights are considered in applying social protection for vulnerable population groups. The HRBF outlined by Sepúlveda et al. (2012) provided a comprehensive basis for identifying the intersecting vulnerabilities of PwDs (Sepúlveda, 2017). Figure 1 presents the framework with 13 principles that impact the social protection of PwDs.



**Figure 1: Human rights-based framework for social protection of persons with disability** (Adapted from Sepúlveda, 2015; United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2016)

### **METHODOLOGY**

This paper aims to explore the lived realities of PwDs from an HRBA perspective in context and explore the research question: How can a human rights-based approach effectively address the social grievances and limited opportunities faced by PwDs in the Maldives, particularly in terms of education and social protection, to advance the LNOB Agenda 2030?

As a single-nation case study, our research explored the unique experiences of PwDs in the Maldives. However, it is important to recognise that our findings’ implications extend beyond our country’s borders. By examining the social grievances and limited opportunities faced by PwDs through an HRBA, our study offers valuable insights that resonate with challenges encountered by PwDs in diverse socio-cultural contexts worldwide. Thus, while rooted in the specific context of the Maldives, our findings contribute to a broader understanding of how to advance the inclusion and empowerment of PwDs on a global scale.

We conducted focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with PwDs and caregivers of Children with Disabilities (CwD) to record lived experiences and map their socio-economic grievances.

We stratified sampling by geographical location to capture the different living circumstances of residents in the islands of Maldives with large and small populations. We used purposive sampling at all stages, identifying participants through social networks and the snowballing method. Geographically, we selected four densely populated administrative regions: Male' (Kaafu Atoll), Addu (Seenu Atoll), Gan (Laamu Atoll) and Kulhudhuffushi (Haa Dhaalu Atoll). After conducting a pilot study, stakeholder consultations revealed that the grievances of small islands may differ from those of larger islands. Accordingly, to reveal the grievances of less populous islands, we included two islands with less than 500 people: Rasgatheem (Raa Atoll) and Madifushi (Thaa Atoll). Table 1 summarises the number of participants from each area.

**Table 1 - Responses from each island across the islands of the Maldives.**

<b>Participant location</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>
Addu (Seenu Atoll)	4
Kulhudhuffushi (Haa Dhaalu Atoll)	2
Gan (Laamu Atoll)	2
Male' (Kaafu Atoll)	4
Madifushi (Thaa Atoll)	1
Rasgatheem (Raa Atoll)	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>

We held the focus groups and interviews using the online platform Google Meet because of the pandemic-related social and movement restrictions during data collection. We contacted participants by phone, providing them with information about the study and obtaining verbal consent. We then sent informed consent forms digitally to their mobile phones using Viber or WhatsApp and received signed copies as digital images. We included participants ranging from 2 – 4 for each focus group. The final sample size was 15 participants (12 participants of four focus groups and three in-depth interviews).

The participants came from different socio-economic backgrounds and included PwDs who were unemployed, engaged in civil society organisations focused on disabilities, worked in public service media, mosque imams and higher education students. As caregivers, there were mothers, fathers and sisters who looked after children with physical and social disabilities, such as Autism and learning disabilities, and a nurse caregiver of an elderly mother with disabilities.

We asked questions to guide the discussions and interviews, focussing on common grievances and expectations from the society, government and other institutions to address these grievances. We recorded the interviews and transcribed and translated them for analysis. We thematically analysed the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), starting with inductive open coding, then clustering the codes through repeated reassignment of data transcripts, continuous comparison and reflexive analysis to generate subthemes. (Braun & Clarke 2019). We used an intersectional lens and a human rights perspective to generate four broad themes that intersect eight areas of HRBF for the social protection of the PwDs.

## **FINDINGS**

The main themes of grievances emerging from the lived experiences of PwDs were: (1) disabling physical environment, (2) exclusion and/or limited social participation, (3) limited opportunities for improving capabilities, and (4) inadequate social protection and safety.

### **Disabling physical environment**

Regarding the environment, the grievances of PwDs and caregivers of CwDs include barriers to mobility and obtaining services, including using roads, public buildings, airports and recreational spaces such as parks and beaches. In addition, study participants pointed to the inaccessibility of water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, such as toilets and handwashing stations, to persons with different disabilities.

One parent went to ministry to submit an application form and needed to get the child (with Autism), to toilet, but the reception staff had to take approval from someone inside to allow it. But parent couldn't stay that long and had to leave and get the child to toilet somewhere else and come back again.

Although some government places that provide services do (have access), but not social spaces like park, places of entertainment, and in some island community centres, there are no opportunities for people like us or children with disabilities.

I was affiliated to xx campus in 2015 back then, it wasn't there available how a disabled person can use a toilet in the campus. I was there for three years, from diploma to degree and within these three years also this issue of how a person in a wheelchair can use a toilet wasn't catered for. So, I have finished my studies without using toilet for three years, so this is how things are.

Travelling or when he is admitted in the hospital and then he has to be cleaned the toilet this (sic) facility is not available for children with disabilities. It's difficult to clean these children even in hospitals.

The PwDs and their caregivers who participated in the study noted that, although there is some attempt to address grievances, it is not done holistically from the perspective of a person with a disability. Increasing accessibility is one of the key provisions of the *Maldives Disability Act* and the *Convention on Disability* (Presidents Office, 2010). Removing these barriers is fundamental to increasing the inclusion and participation of PwDs in society. Despite regulation on minimum standards for accessibility that mandates that existing buildings be brought up to standards and that new buildings be made accessible as per minimum standards, this study found a number of gaps in implementation, requiring greater attention from policymakers, businesses and civil society to ensure these minimum standards (UNCRPD, 2019).

### **Exclusion and/or limited social participation**

The second theme that emerged was the exclusion and limited social participation of PwDs in society. The study found that families and community still viewed PwDs as dependents and did not know or perceive the importance of increasing the independence and autonomy of PwDs. The available literature on community engagement of PwDs in Maldives indicates that only a small fraction (5%) of PwDs engage in the community (Ali, 2002). The participants alluded to the need for PwDs to be imparted with life skills for self-care and social interaction to enable them to function and engage with their families and community.

Always the child (with disabilities) is viewed as someone they have to take care of their whole life and they are obliged to look after the disabled child forever. This is the thinking parents of a disabled child has, and as long as we are alive, we will look after the disabled child, this is the mentality parents have. But they don't think about how this child will survive once they pass away, and I think this will only happen if we give them this kind of awareness, we need to aware the society and parents about this.

Although the participants acknowledged some improvement in the perception of the communities, such as reduced stigma, there continues to be exclusion. Some examples of exclusion cited include not providing opportunities to help out in the events within the family, not giving opportunities in recreation and sport, and thinking that they will not be able to and will find it too hard to do so. Participants noted that these mindsets prevent them from developing the skills and capabilities for independent functioning as they grow.

Even though we are blind, we still have physical strength, we also like to lift, for example, heavy things or change arrangements of the house or even go for picnics, let's say to unload or load things to a pickup, to go for a picnic. So personally, to lift something's heavy and the fun that comes from lifting, this is something I would personally like to do, but they will not give me these kinds of chance.

They will tell me why you don't wait a bit at home. They don't make me part of the fun. What will you do if you go there (picnic) and you will just have to stand there?

When you say it's a child with autism, they label the child as a child who cannot sit tight or is hyper but not how we can contribute to help the child, what we can do to include the child, how happy will the child be if we take the child someplace and play with the child, it is not there, these different aspects do not come forth in awareness.

The participants advocated for the need to educate and support families and the community to realise the importance of inclusion in its fullest sense and show how they can include PwDs in community activities and events rather than keeping them on the sidelines as observers. While some interventions have provided skills for increased participation, such as sign language training, awareness sessions for employers and awards to encourage skills of PwDs, the efforts are inadequate and disjointed to make a meaningful impact (MGFM, 2018). There is a need to develop a comprehensive, coordinated effort at national and local governance levels to increase awareness of the inclusion of PwDs in social activities and interventions in consultation with PwDs and their caregivers to understand better their needs and perception of inclusion for meaningful social engagement. For instance, re-signifying inclusive special education is an important move that Koloto (2021) shows can make policies more culturally appropriate and engage communities for whom current approaches have limited purchase.

### **Limited opportunities for improving capabilities such as education and skills**

The PwDs and the caregivers of children with disabilities pointed out that there are limited to no opportunities for basic education, skills training for work and productivity.

The participants noted that school systems are not adequately prepared to address the special education needs of children with disabilities (CwDs) to provide them with the knowledge and skills to enable them to have meaningful engagement in society and be productive citizens. They cited that the opportunity for schooling for CwDs is only available in the Male' city area and at selected schools in the atolls, which are also not appropriately staffed with trained teachers who understand the specific needs of children with different types of disabilities, particularly those with the behavioural disabilities of Autism Spectrum of Disorders.

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I did not get any support from the school management, there were complaints from parents of other children in the class, that their children were not getting the attention because my child is with special needs.

I have to say that the school system is a bit better than before. There are specific teachers also for them now, but the additional facilities they need is not available, it's limited; it is improved to a very small extent but not much.

A major criticism was on the policy of inclusive education in Maldives, with the participants noting that there is a lack of investment in teachers and resources to implement the policy, citing gaps in teacher capacities and the absence of technology-enhanced assistive devices that can be used for teaching children with special education needs (Ministry of Education, Maldives, 2021).

Considering the narratives regarding the lack of resources to implement the inclusive education policy, it is also essential to explore deeper the challenges surrounding the policy's implementation within the Ministry of Education (MOE) of the Maldives. The focus should be on examining why a severe lack of resources is allocated, identifying potential gaps in funding or support, and exploring avenues for improvement. The provision of learning facilities, such as Braille for the blind, alternative scripts and training teachers and professionals with the capability to cater to these individuals in both government-run schools and private schools is also problematic and easier said than done (EFA Country Report, 2015).

Furthermore, study participants criticised the school management and school community for not being tolerant of the needs of CwDs in the school system. They were accused of labelling these children as disruptive, resulting in the exclusion of the CwDs from their right to education.

What happens is when teachers finish their teacher training, their attitudes and they not being aware of how to attend to children with disabilities. Teachers are not comfortable to face children with disabilities. So, I feel that when they conduct teacher education, their curriculum should include (how to attend to children with disabilities) for a reasonable time.

If we talk about blind children, (school name) school in Maldives only provides education using braille, this service is not there for any blind children anywhere else in the country.

Even when they do use braille, it is also not done appropriately.

Participants noted similar grievances about opportunities for vocational skill development and higher education, which limits their capabilities to engage in the labour force and productive work. Participants listed the significant limitation they face in terms of their lack of opportunities to develop English literacy skills, ultimately restricting their job prospects. Furthermore, the participants noted that employers do not perceive that PwDs can do work.

Everything a normal child can do in front of a computer; a blind child can also do in 90% capacity. So, these are also jobs (they can do as well), so we need to create more job opportunities, strengthen education, strengthen the existing laws, and things would work out for better then.

English has become important, for example, in a resort reception, they can work or if we look at the situation of doctors who is speaking in English, we are not able to go and talk to doctor we have to ask someone else to convey or communicate with the doctor on our behalf because we don't know English so we can't communicate our problems to doctors the best way and also same issue talking to a teacher or even a guest who comes to the island.



Strindlund et al. (2019) noted that there are different views of employability, namely as constrained by disability, independent of disability and conditional, which are characterised through their association with trust, contribution and support. Furthermore, participants noted that there is no option for vocational training for PwDs, and even for those who can gain entry into higher education are not catered to their special education needs (with assistive technologies) at colleges and universities in the country. Like schools, participants recalled their experiences at colleges and universities and noted that higher educational institutes are not inclusive. In particular, lecturers do not understand technologies that can be used to address special education needs of university students and that the modes of delivery do not take into account the needs of PwDs.

One thing for children who are growing, we need to make it (education infrastructure) more accessible to them so we are not talking about making a small ramp in front of the door but accessible means that all that is required in order for them to get an education that is available to them within the school or even universities.

One way is for the government to provide audio lessons for all that in the curriculum or produce braille textbooks and give to them.

While higher education provided at government-funded universities is free for all citizens, the MoE, Maldives, in January 2021, announced that the higher education loan scheme would be revised to provide special provision to PwDs, thereby creating opportunities for them to pursue higher education (Higher Education Ministry sets aside special loans for persons with disabilities, 2021). However, although the recently enacted law on higher education (7/2021) emphasises the need for equality and non-discrimination, it does not have specific provisions to guarantee access to higher education for PwDs (Presidents Office, 2021).

### **Inadequate social protection and safety**

Caregivers of CwDs pointed out that having a CwD significantly raises the cost of living. In essence, a person with disabilities should be considered equivalent to two individuals because the caregiver often has to dedicate themselves full time to the care of the CwDs, leaving no opportunity to engage in income-generating activities. Hence, participants expressed concern with sadness and anger that the disability allowance is grossly inadequate.

Now we have to manage with the income of my husband only. I am not able to earn a big income staying home, with three children at home. Having a CwD narrows opportunity, especially for mothers, to earn income.

The treatment and therapy of the CwDs and school related expenses are also quite big. The disability allowance of MVR 2000 (US\$129.32) is very less compared to expenses needed for a CwD.

Increased expense is one of the major grievances since a diagnosis is a prerequisite for eligibility for social protection benefits or cover for assistive devices. Participants noted that this is an intervention several governments have pledged to provide but have not produced any sustained outcomes. Participants complained of limited opportunities for assessment even in the Male' city area and the hardship faced by people living on atolls to get the needed health assessment. Participants noted the non-viability of services for disability assessment not only delays care for CwDs but also results in the worsening of disability and loss of valuable time to improve the function of children and their capabilities for self-care and interactions with other people, thus making them more dependent.

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For example, the therapies that we need, the medicine or therapies for disabled people are not available in the island itself so we have to travel somewhere else and try to get these facilities, and this is also difficult because we have to travel. So, we don't have an additional way of earning money, and this becomes a very big challenging for us too.

Getting disability allowance for the children is a very difficult process. As I said earlier, we have to get the specialist's report. And cannot get the allowance without the report. That is very difficult when the report is not there.

In addition, participants noted that due to the complicated procedures set out to be able to register for disability benefits, many PwDs, including children, do not receive any disability benefits or support. This statement is corroborated by the 2017-2019 disability study that showed only 25.5% of the people with disabilities receive the benefit, and even among those who received the benefit, no impact on the quality of life was observed (Hameed et al., 2020). This evidence further points to the inadequacy and inaccessibility of the current social protection scheme for PwDs.

Another aspect of social protection highlighted was the abuse and exploitation of PwDs, particularly children with disabilities. Participants raised concern and told of the experiences of survivor CwDs who had faced sexual abuse while at home from members close to the family and neighbours who are aware of the child's situation.

PwDs, particularly children don't usually go out in the society. They are not aware of the different types of people, the approaches they use, and some people in the neighbourhood use this lack of knowledge to their advantage, and the PwDs falls victim to sexual abuse.

It is estimated as much as 10% of the PwDs have been subjected to various forms of abuse, and 40 to 60% of girls or women with disabilities have been subjected to sexual abuse (HRCM, 2020). Furthermore, study participants highlighted that several political actors exploit CwDs and their current circumstances to advance their own political agendas. This manipulation results in negative consequences for both PwDs and their caregivers when they express their concerns through platforms like social media or engage in peaceful protests, leading to backlash and conflict.

Politicians use the CwDs as a tool for their campaigns. We believe this is wrong. Every time they say, in our government, these children will not be neglected, that these services will be provided, but there's no mechanism to provide services from one place for PwDs.

Despite the claims of modern democracy in the Maldives, such comments reflect a prevalence of paternalism in the society and public institutions. Clifton (2020), discussing power imbalance concerning PwDs, notes that without substantive changes to personal and cultural attitudes and values, PwDs remain victims to hierarchical power that makes them vulnerable to direct and systemic violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation throughout their lives. As such, participants expressed the need to conduct widespread awareness campaigns focussing on policymakers and communities to prevent such exploitation, sincerely include PwDs, and improve their meaningful engagement in society.

The participants used multiple methods to express their grievances, all of which were peaceful means. The dominant methods employed are discussions and dialogue. They discuss with family and peer groups (caregiver groups), as well as civil society organisations. The participants use mobile platforms and calls to discuss their grievances. In addition to these groups, the participants noted they visit relevant public institutions and meet public officials to

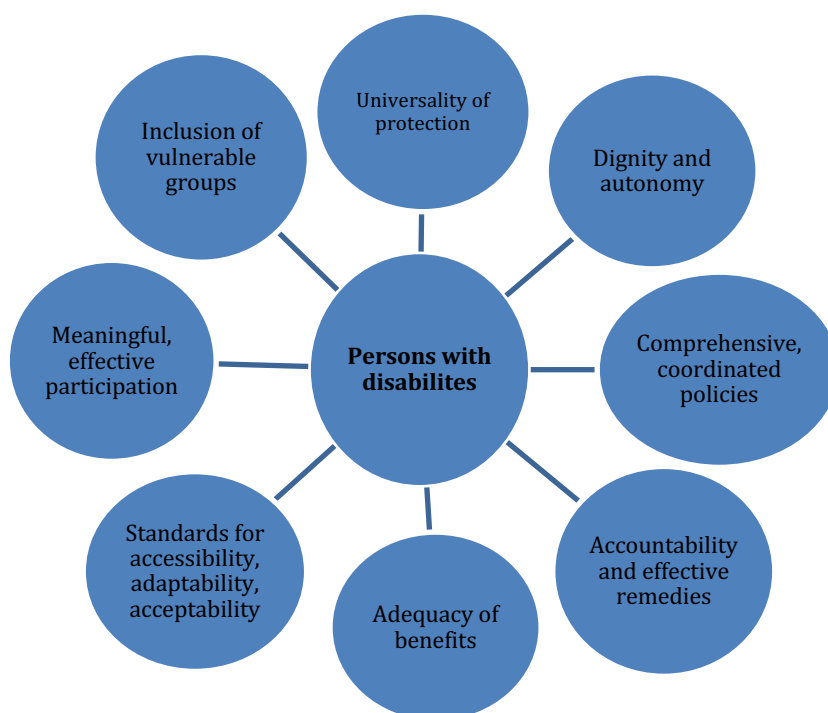
express their grievances and to find solutions to their collective needs. Younger PwDs use social media as their main modality for expressing their grievances.

The Male' focus group participants described the backlash they experienced when they expressed major concerns on public social media platforms and when a peaceful protest was planned in the form of warnings and threats of further delay in implementing the policies to protect PwDs.

We even arranged a protest, but one Member of Parliament in our group knew and made us stop it. We were warned that if we do things like those things will not be made easy, that there is a nicer way.

## Discussion & Conclusions

The themes from the findings intersect with several issues identified in the human rights-based framework on the social protection of PwDs, as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: The main areas of the human rights-based framework relating to the PwD's grievances themes**

The grievances of the PwDs in the Maldives are regarding protecting their rights. There is considerable emphasis on the government and duty bearers to implement interventions for the protection of the PwDs as required by the *Disability Act of the Maldives* and the obligations of *CRPD*.

Creating a physically enabling environment that provides opportunities for meaningful and effective participation, dignity, and autonomy comes across strongly from the participants' narratives. Consistent with the findings, studies in other small island countries indicate that community perceptions towards the capabilities of PwDs are negative (Hopf & McLeod, 2015). Jones & Serieux-Lubin (2018) argued that recognising that PwDs have the same rights to education, health, work and employment, shelter, and participation in social activities is fundamental to shifting the worldview towards including persons and their capabilities. The

findings indicated the immediate need to bring about the paradigm shift in how disability is viewed by people, within families, society and duty bearers to create such an enabling environment, as articulated in Article 8 of *CRPD* and recognised as fundamental to realising the capabilities of PwDs and their dignity. It is imperative to recognise the intersectionality of human rights to bring about the paradigm shift and recognise those rights through supportive relations (Skarstad, 2018).

Fulfilling the right to health is a basic element needing the attention of society's duty bearers and their partners towards building the capabilities of children with disabilities. The findings indicate the gross inadequacies that not only deprive CwDs of the best possible developmental potential in terms of motor skills, language and social development but also cause secondary problems (Patel et al., 2018). Recent studies suggest the need for policy reorientation and management of health care delivery reform towards integrating occupational therapy and physiotherapy services in primary care to reduce referral to secondary care of PwDs (Brooks et al., 2021).

Moreover, there appears to be a gap in the provision of assistive devices to enhance the capabilities of PwDs. The state report on *CRDP* notes the absence of a comprehensive register of PwDs, which hinders the fulfilment of state obligations (UNCRPD, 2019). Tangcharoensathien et al. (2018) noted that demand for assistive devices is low in many countries because of limited awareness among PwDs, their caregivers and service providers; product designs are insufficiently informed by users' and caregivers' preferences and environments; there is low production quality; cost are high; and there is a scarcity of trained personnel to service the products. Hence, there is a critical need to increase awareness among PwDs, health and social care providers, and beneficiaries on the options for making appropriate assistive devices in the country and increasing accessibility of the products to PwDs to enhance their functioning and capabilities.

Considering the narratives regarding the lack of resources to implement the inclusive education policy, it is essential to explore the challenges surrounding the policy's implementation within the MOE of the Maldives. Fulfilling the right to education of PwDs is necessary to lay the foundation of knowledge and basic life skills that open opportunities and enable self-determination. Studies in the Maldives show that school leaders need to provide more pedagogical support to teachers to help children with disabilities; facilitate a physically safe climate for all the students; and provide opportunities for teachers to acquire more knowledge and skills for teaching students with special education needs in mainstream classes (Shareefa, 2016). Other researchers noted the complexity of developing inclusive education and the changes required in societal views, education policymakers, schools and classrooms to achieve the goal of inclusive education in the school system (Naseer, 2012). Similar findings are reported from other small island countries in the Caribbean and the Pacific that note the gaps in the capacity of teachers and materials to support teaching and learning for CwDs (Pillay et al., 2015). Katsui et al. (2014) noted that a human rights framework needs to be applied to education policy choices, resource allocations and management decision making to accelerate progress towards inclusive education.

As already argued, the current system of social protection schemes in Maldives does not reach most PwDs (Hameed et al., 2021). Consistent with the findings of other similar research, low access to health and therapeutic services places families with a CwD at risk of falling into poverty, making them multidimensionally vulnerable because they must find alternative solutions (Mitra et al., 2017).

The study findings indicate that the community is losing trust in government institutions and political actors because they do not fulfil their obligations as duty bearers and use the PwDs issue only as a political tool to win votes, making false promises. However, the issue of holding duty-bearers accountable is complex and spans across multiple levels of public institutions. Doody (2009) suggests this means “keeping people accountable at all levels in services, from rights holders up through different levels of duty bearers and ultimately to those responsible for funding and commissioning services” (p. 297).

The intersections across these social aspects make it clear that there is systematic neglect of the rights of PwDs that needs to be addressed comprehensively in a coordinated manner to recognise the impact of gaps in one human rights domain on another. Fundamental to progress in this direction requires a shift in how society and policymakers see PwDs as part of human diversity and a segment of the population with the same rights as able persons in society. The importance of creating greater awareness among policymakers, businesses, families and community about the need for the inclusion of PwDs and their protection and meaningful engagement in society is underscored as fundamental to progress towards fulfilment of Agenda 2030. This includes engagement of PwDs in policy formulation and program development at national and local levels to enable evidence-based interventions that address the needs of PwDs and enable the development of their capabilities to function optimally as productive citizens of the country.

This article explored grievances and the human rights of PwDs from the perspective of different types of disabilities. There is a need to explore these aspects further by including approaches that have successfully shifted the moral view towards PwDs from being seen as dependents to acknowledging human diversity. This includes exploring awareness and behaviour change communication and adopting a human rights approach in policy planning and programming social protection programmes for PwDs.

The grievances of PwDs lie in the non-fulfilment of their human rights. Hence, a human rights-based approach to the social protection of PwDs is needed to progress in developing their capabilities for meaningful social engagement and contribute to development. Raising awareness among society, policymakers and development partners regarding this perspective is crucial to fostering this shift and advancing towards the ‘Leave No One Behind Agenda’ goal by 2030.

This study contributes to the existing knowledge base by providing insights into the challenges faced by PwDs in the Maldives, particularly in the context of inclusive education and social protection. By highlighting the gaps in policy implementation and the need for greater attention to the rights of PwDs, this research adds to the literature on disability rights and social inclusion in small island developing states. Additionally, the comparative analysis with studies from similar contexts provides valuable lessons and perspectives for policymakers and practitioners working towards improving the lives of PwDs in the Maldives and beyond.

In conclusion, our study sheds light on the multifaceted challenges faced by PwDs in the Maldives, offering insights into the intersectionality of human rights, social protection and inclusion efforts. Through an exploration of PwDs’ grievances and the implementation of a human rights-based framework, we highlighted the urgent need for comprehensive policy interventions and societal shifts to address systemic barriers to inclusion and empowerment.

PwDs’ and caregivers’ narratives emphasised the pressing need for increased accessibility, both in physical infrastructure and social services, to ensure meaningful participation and autonomy. Furthermore, our findings highlighted gaps in education and skills development opportunities,

emphasising the importance of targeted interventions to support PwDs' access to quality education and vocational training.

Drawing comparisons with other low- and middle-income countries and small island states, we also brought to focus the unique challenges faced by PwDs in the Maldives while recognising shared struggles across diverse contexts. This comparative perspective emphasised the importance of global collaboration and knowledge exchange in advancing disability rights and social inclusion agendas. Our study advocates for a paradigm shift in societal perceptions of disability, emphasising the importance of viewing PwDs as active agents of change and contributors to societal development. By centring on human rights principles in policy formulation and program implementation, we can work towards realising the 'Leave No One Behind Agenda of 2030' aspirations and creating a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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