

# "VUNA - INVEST IN CHILDREN"



**CHILD RIGHTS SYMPOSIUM 2**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**2024**



CHILDREN'S  
OMBUDSPERSON'S  
OFFICE  
REPUBLIC OF MALDIVES

Vuna – Invest in Children  
Child Rights Symposium 2

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## Introduction

The Child Rights Symposium 2 held on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> November 2024 was focused on the theme “Vuna: Invest in Children” emphasized holistic, non-financial, and long-term investment in children’s rights, education, health, and protection and consisted of international as well as national stakeholders, such as government agencies, civil society organizations, academics, and children. As such, the symposium focused on three themes:

1. Safeguarding Children within the Juvenile Justice System
2. Ensuring a Bully-Free Environment
3. Children and Mental Health

It featured keynote speeches, research presentations, panel discussions, and children-led activities. A major milestone of the Child Rights Symposium 2 was the launch of “**Growing Up in Maldives**” – a longitudinal study to inform policy through evidence.

**Dr. Farah Nini Dusuki**, the keynote speaker of the Child Rights Symposium 2 and the **Malaysian Children’s Commissioner** opened by thanking the organizers and acknowledged progress in the Maldives while reflecting on Malaysia’s challenges in child rights within its multicultural, multi-religious, and federal context. Malaysia has protective legal frameworks but struggles with consistent implementation due to its dual legal system (civil and Shariah law), decentralization, and persistent cultural practices. As such, her presentations focused on the key issues, service gaps in addition to the strengths and progress within Malaysia as indicated below:

### Key Issues:

- **Child Protection:** Physical and sexual abuse cases are increasing, especially in Selangor. Juvenile offenses are declining, mostly involving boys.
- **Vulnerable Groups:** Indigenous children, those in state care, and those “beyond control” face systemic gaps. Child marriage, female circumcision, and corporal punishment still persist.
- **Health and Wellbeing:** Malaysia faces both malnutrition and obesity, widespread violent punishment, and rising adolescent suicides. Anti-vax sentiment is causing the return of preventable diseases.
- **Climate Impact:** Marginalized children are vulnerable to floods and environmental risks. UNICEF data informed recent budget reforms in health and early education.

- **Participation:** A cultural mindset of “children seen but not heard” limits engagement, though a recent child-led report to the UNCRC shows growing progress.

#### **Service Gaps:**

- Limited professional training and public awareness lead to weak child protection.
- Childcare remains unaffordable for many.
- Poor coordination between state and civil society actors.
- Children’s voices are still not meaningfully included in policymaking.

#### **Strengths and Progress:**

- Strong legal frameworks exist, with some proactive government departments (e.g., prison reform).
- Political will for reform is growing, with frequent legal amendments and new laws like the Online Safety Bill.
- Civil society and children themselves are increasingly engaged.

She concluded by saying that while Malaysia is advancing in legal reform and awareness, deep-rooted cultural practices, service delivery gaps, and limited child participation continue to pose challenges, and emphasized that data-driven advocacy and a sustained commitment to listening to children are essential in order to make significant progress.

# **Theme 1: Safeguarding Children within the Juvenile Justice System**

## **Part 1: Vulnerability of Children**

### **Keynote Speech:**

Keynote speaker, **Ms. Diahann Gordon-Harrison** who serves as the **Children’s Advocate in the Office of the Children’s Advocate in Jamaica** emphasized that children are inherently vulnerable and justice systems are not trauma-informed. She indicated that vulnerability stems from weak family structures, poverty, social isolation, lack of education, and community violence. Her presentation highlighted three main themes:

### **1. Understanding Vulnerability in the Justice System**

- Children are inherently vulnerable due to age, dependence on adults, limited access to services, and blind trust in adults in positions of trust.
- Justice systems are intimidating and adult-centered, often lacking trauma-informed and child-sensitive approaches.
- Children face overlapping vulnerabilities—those needing protection may also become offenders or victims due to systemic failures.
- A 2015 multi-country study found strong linkages between children in care, those in conflict with the law, and a lack of effective rehabilitation—especially when root causes like poverty and family breakdown go unaddressed.

### **2. Systemic Gaps and Harmful Practices**

- Children from marginalized, underserved communities are disproportionately at risk of being involved in the justice system due to poverty, weak family structures, and inadequate education.
- Co-mingling children in detention, regardless of offense type, also leads to criminal socialization and worsens outcomes.
- Children are frequently excluded from decision-making in court proceedings, especially in custody, neglect, or care-related cases—denying them their participatory rights.

### **3. Recommendations and Best Practices**

- Strengthen protective factors by investing in parenting support, mental health services, quality education, and poverty reduction.

- Train justice professionals (judges, police, prosecutors) in trauma-informed, child-friendly practices to ensure dignified treatment and effective rehabilitation.
- Adopt standardized guidelines like Jamaica’s Child Justice Guidelines, recognized internationally, to protect children’s rights and ensure fair, consistent handling of cases across the justice system.

### **1.1.1: “A Study on the Factors Affecting Vulnerability of Children”**

The **Ministry of Education (MOE)** of the Maldives presented a pilot study conducted by MOE that highlighted the risk factors and protective factors contributing to the vulnerability of children within the Maldivian community. It was a quantitative study conducted in two phases across four schools, involving 800 students (Grades 6–8). A pre-assessment identified 67 at-risk students who then underwent detailed vulnerability evaluations through questionnaires distributed to students, parents, and teachers.

It assessed children’s vulnerability through a newly developed tool, building on findings from the Early Grade Risk Assessment (2016–2020). The tool evaluates children across four domains:

- Family/community,
- Health/well-being,
- Education/school, and
- Potential conflict with the law

– guided by frameworks like Maslow’s hierarchy and OECD definitions. The findings indicate are:

- **Risk Factors:**
  - Family/Community: Parental separation, illness, or disability in the household.
  - Health/Well-being: Mental health issues, chronic illness, physical disabilities.
  - Education: Poor academic performance, learning difficulties.
- **Protective Factors:**
  - Supportive home environment
  - Positive behavior
  - Engagement in school and extracurriculars
  - Strong community ties
  - Access to services.

Among the 67 at-risk students, 30 were classified as highly vulnerable, 21 as moderately vulnerable, and 16 as low risk.

### **Recommendations:**

- Train educators in using the tool and managing interventions.
- Establish referral protocols and mandatory reporting guidelines.
- Scale up the tool to more schools with built-in monitoring.

### **1.1.2: “Juvenile Offenses Over the Last Decade (2013-2022): A Statistical Overview”**

*Note: This presentation was retracted after the Child Rights Symposium 2.*

### **1.1.3: “Unravelling the Threads of Youth: A Holistic Exploration of Juvenile Delinquency in Maldivian Society”**

Moving on, the **Islamic University of Maldives (IUM)** explored juvenile delinquency factors in Maldives. This mixed-methods study examined the root causes of juvenile delinquency through stakeholder interviews (20) and a survey (336 respondents).

### **Key Findings:**

- **Top Contributing Factors:**
  - Lack of parental supervision (21.8%)
  - Weaknesses in law enforcement and the justice system (20%)
  - Family conflicts (18.2%)
  - Peer pressure (14.5%)
  - Socioeconomic hardships (poverty, unemployment)
  - Normalization of crime through media
  - Educational disengagement due to resource gaps
  - Cultural norms trivializing certain offenses

### **Discussion:**

Family-related factors remain the most influential, echoing global findings. Parental neglect, unstable households, and weak community support leave youth vulnerable to peer influence and criminal activity. Though legal provisions exist, their impact is limited due to poor enforcement and lack of child-sensitive systems.

**Recommendations:**

- Introduce parent education and counseling programs.
- Foster multi-agency collaboration for rehabilitation.
- Develop structured vocational training programs.
- Reform outdated or inapplicable legal frameworks.
- Implement practical, community-based legal responses.

## Part 2: Prevention and Responses

### Keynote Speech:

Keynote speaker **Ms. Anne Hollonds** who serves as the **National Children’s Commissioner in the Australian Human Rights Commission** emphasized ways to transform child justice to improve the safety and wellbeing of children. She offered several recommendations with regards to preventing and responding to juvenile offenses in a global context:

### **National Leadership and Governance**

- Establish a **National Taskforce** to lead a 10-year National Roadmap for child justice reform, reporting to relevant Ministers.
- Appoint a Cabinet Minister for Children, responsible for children’s rights and wellbeing.
- Create a Ministerial Council for Child Wellbeing, chaired by the Minister and reporting to the Parliament of the Maldives.

### **Support for Children and Families**

- Improve access to affordable housing, income support, and integrated health, education, and social services—including some school-based services.
- Provide free, culturally safe prevention and diversion programs (e.g., sport, music, cultural activities).

### **Child Justice System Reform**

- Ban solitary confinement for children.
- Invest in:
  - Restorative justice and child-specialist courts.
  - Workforce training and data systems.
- Ensure national consistency in:
  - Monitoring child detention.
  - Using child rights impact assessments.
  - Implementing international treaty obligations.

### 1.2.1: “The Dilemmas of the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility”

The **United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)** highlighted the dilemmas around the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility (MACR) and the importance of raising MACR and the implementation diversion programs instead of child prosecution. Key points included:

- Resolving the dilemma with regards to the MACR: Create platforms for conversations, transparent policies grounded in scientific evidence, prioritize the best interest of the child.
- A Model for Rehabilitation: Multisectoral initiative in developing a holistic programme for identified children in conflict with the law.

### 1.2.2: “Should we lower the minimum age of responsibility? What are the Alternatives?”

Secondly, **Advocating the Rights of Children (ARC)** also presented findings from a desk review, that indicated the exploitation of children to be high, once again highlighting concerns in reducing the MACR. Key elements of the presentation include:

- Factors leading to child exploitation:
  - Unintentional neglect including exposure to abuse
  - Development delays
  - School drop-out
  - Chronic health issues
  - Intentional neglect including abuse and exploitation
  - Substance abuse
  - Life-long mental health issues
  - Violent extremism, etc.
- Challenges:
  - Low rates of investigated, prosecuted and convicted cases
  - Difficulty proving exploitation of children without pre-trial detention
  - CPC restrictions on pre-trial detention cases, etc.
- Prevention and Response:
  - Modification of laws to investigate child exploitation
  - Increase law enforcement capacity to rely on covert operations, etc.

- Limitations in the implementation of the Juvenile Justice Act (JJA):
  - Lack of restorative pathways
  - Limited work with children at-risk
  - Limited capacity for assessments
  - Limited work related to prevention
  - Limited juvenile detention facilities, and,
  - Community perception.

**Recommendations offered by ARC include:**

- Amendment of the Criminal Procedure Code to facilitate the investigation, prosecution and conviction of Child Exploitation (CE) cases.
- Increase MPS operational capacity to deal with CE.
- Realign the social protection system from an entitlement approach to a child-centric approach
- Prevention work with a special focus on vulnerable families
- Increase institutions' capacity to fully implement Juvenile Justice Act 18/2019 (JJA), especially on working with children at-risk.
- Increase state capacity in conducting assessments mandated by JJA
- Fully establish the diversion system envisioned in JJA
- Ensure that the Juvenile Detention Center's (JDC) goal is rehabilitation and reintegrating children without the possibility of re-offending
- Complete the rolling-out of Positive Parenting Programme
- Explore the possibility of accessing social protection system for families
- Increase the support systems for parents by increasing access to services such as day cares, mental health services, etc.
- Identify more community-based approaches for crime prevention such as the model used in Fuvahmulah City
- More outreach in communities to change their perception on crime, and to facilitate reintegration
- Sustainable prevention campaigns with clearly defined goals and M&E frameworks
- Inclusion of Civil Society Organizations (CSO) and community-based groups in crime prevention efforts

### 1.2.3: “IBAMA – Preventive approach towards children in conflict with the law”

Finally, the **Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSFD)** presented an overview of the IBAMA program which serves as a Maldivian model for early interventions with children at-risk and highlighted the 4 steps of the model:

- Initial training
- Vulnerability mapping
- Formulation of interventions plans and providing assistance
- Supportive supervision and monitoring

Additionally, it also highlighted the challenges within families, communities, and in the general operationalization of IBAMA such as the lack of structure, inconsistent family engagement, etc.

### 1.2.4: Key Recommendations: Safeguarding Children within the Juvenile Justice System

- **Policy and Legal Reform**
  - Preserve the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility (MACR) at 15 years old as stipulated in the Juvenile Justice Act (2019), in line with international standards and regional trends. Avoid proposals to reduce MACR, and instead strengthen diversion pathways.
  - Amend existing laws to enable differentiated responses for children based on age, maturity, and type of **offense**—particularly for first-time and non-violent offenders.
- **Family and Community Interventions**
  - Strengthen and scale up the IBAMA program across atolls, particularly targeting high-risk areas identified in data acquire by DJJ.
  - Introduce parental training and family strengthening initiatives through MSFD and island councils, focusing on child supervision, non-violent discipline, and communication.
- **Data and System Development**
  - Digitize and standardize administrative data systems across DJJ, police, and courts, with clear disaggregation by age, gender, offense type, and location.

- **Capacity Building**

- Train police officers, social workers, prosecutors, and judges on child-sensitive, trauma-informed practices through DJJ and the Judicial Academy.
- Establish multidisciplinary child protection teams at the island level involving schools, island councils, police, and family protection services.

## Theme 2: Ensuring a Bully-Free Environment

### Keynote Speech:

The keynote speech under the theme “Ensuring a bully-free environment” was delivered by two students – one from Villa College and another from the Centre for Higher Secondary Education (CHSE).

### **Opening Message:**

Zara Afzal and Yoosuf Bin Muhammadh share Aisha’s painful experience with bullying to highlight the urgent need for stronger, more effective anti-bullying measures in Maldivian schools.

### **Aisha’s Story:**

Aisha, a smart and kind 12-year-old, endured years of bullying—starting with whispers and exclusion, escalating to cruel rumors. Despite reporting it to teachers and her parents intervening, the school only acted when it was too late, focusing on managing the situation rather than resolving it.

### **Key Issues in Current Anti-Bullying Policies**

- **Narrow Definitions of Bullying:** Many schools only recognize physical bullying, ignoring social exclusion, rumors, and cyberbullying—forms of harm just as damaging as physical aggression.
- **Lack of Early Intervention:** Bullying is often ignored until it becomes severe. Early signs like teasing or exclusion must be addressed before long-term harm is done.
- **Limited Student Involvement:** Students see and experience bullying firsthand, yet current systems leave them out. Empowering students to recognize and act against bullying is crucial.
- **Insufficient Support for Victims:** Victims like Aisha need long-term emotional support, not just short-term fixes. Counseling and safe spaces should be guaranteed parts of school policy.
- **Neglecting the Needs of Bullies:** Children who bully often struggle with deeper issues. Supporting them through counseling and empathy training can help stop the cycle.
- **Need for Ongoing Training & Awareness:** Anti-bullying efforts must be continuous—not just annual events. Teachers and students need regular, updated training on identifying and addressing bullying.
- **Conclusion – A Call for Action:** Aisha’s story reflects the failures of reactive, outdated policies. It’s time for schools, parents, students, and policymakers to work together to create proactive,

compassionate systems that protect all children. Every child deserves to feel safe, heard and supported.

### **2.1: Presentation of Findings: Child Rights Symposium 2 Survey**

The first presentation consisted of findings with regards to a survey that was conducted by the **Children's Ombudsperson's Office** identifying the key issues in the community in the perspective of children. 28.6% children identified bullying as the more persistent issue occurring within the school environment and even cyber spaces. Key findings from pre-symposium survey include:

- Children cited school and social media as major venues for bullying.
- Lack of reporting due to fear or normalization of bullying behaviors.
- Bullying as the root cause of several issues - including but not limited to low performance in schools, worsening mental health problems, low self-esteem, and weak physical health.
- Support structures (teachers, counselors) are often perceived as ineffective or unavailable.

### **2.2: Ensuring a Bully-Free Environment**

The next presentation was by the **Ministry of Education** emphasizing the role of the overall education system to prevent the victimization of children from bullying. The presentation discussed the definition, types, impacts and even the key policies addressing bullying. Key takeaways from the presentation include:

- Role of school staff in preventing bullying: School counselors, liaison officers, teachers and administration, and their collaborative efforts in the prevention of bullying
- Challenges: Misinterpretation of the term 'bullying', resistance from parents and students in addressing bullying, limited resources, etc.
- Areas for improvement: Enhancing staff training and awareness, fostering stronger collaboration between schools, and parents, expanding mental health support services.

### **2.3: "Cyberbullying in the Maldives – Understanding the Issues and Finding Solutions"**

Next, the Cyber Crime Investigations Unit of the **Maldives Police Service** took it one step ahead, and utilized a multifaceted approach to specifically discuss cyberbullying in the Maldives. Key elements of the presentation include:

## **Key Challenges**

### **1. Borderless Nature of Cyberspace**

- Online platforms operate beyond national jurisdiction, making regulation difficult.
- Community standards on global platforms (e.g., Facebook, TikTok) may fail to act on harmful content.
- Cooperation with international bodies like Interpol and social media companies is essential.

### **2. Lack of Awareness and Digital Literacy**

- Parents and teachers are often unaware of children's online behavior and risks.
- Children are given access to devices without guidance.
- Many are unfamiliar with reporting/blocking tools on digital platforms.

### **3. Impact on Schools and Communities**

- Online bullying often escalates into school-based conflicts.
- "Confession pages" and anonymous bullying are common and damaging.

## **Common Forms of Cyberbullying in the Maldives**

- Online Harassment – Intimidation via digital platforms.
- Doxing – Public release of personal or sensitive information.
- Cyberstalking – Persistent threats or humiliation online.
- Posting Embarrassing Content – Sharing demeaning images or videos.
- Sending Threats or Hateful Messages – Use of digital messages to cause fear

## **Current Efforts to Address Cyberbullying**

### **1. Awareness Programs**

- MPS has held 238 sessions for over 19,600 participants focusing on digital safety and cyberbullying prevention.

### **2. Collaborations**

- Partnerships with tech companies and international bodies to remove harmful content.
- Encouragement for schools and families to report incidents promptly.

### **3. Promoting Positive Online Behavior**

- Teaching children to use technology constructively and with respect.
- Promoting empathy and digital citizenship.

## **Practical Measures for Parents and Schools**

- **Monitoring and Reporting:** Parents should monitor device usage and encourage reporting of negative experiences.
- **Parental Controls:** Tools like Apple Screen Time and Google Family Link can help supervise digital activity.
- **Guidance and Counseling:** Schools should provide support and teachers should be alert to signs of bullying.
- **Creating a Supportive Environment:** Open communication between children and guardians is key to prevention and response.

### **2.4: “Review of Bullying Research at Villa College”**

Finally, Villa College presented four studies they had conducted on bullying, focusing on its long-term effects and underlying causes. These studies, which primarily involve retrospective reflections by college students and expert insights from social workers, aim to provide a deeper understanding of bullying beyond school settings.

#### **Key Findings from the Studies:**

1. **Gender & Bullying Patterns**
  - Verbal bullying is the most common type reported.
  - Females tend to experience more verbal and mixed-gender bullying.
  - Males are more often targeted by male peers.
2. **Long-Term Impact**
  - Victims of bullying report lingering effects into adulthood, particularly on self-esteem.
  - Cyberbullying, though less frequent, still has significant psychological impact.
3. **Social Workers’ Insights**
  - Bullying can become a defense mechanism; children retaliate when their self-worth is hurt.
  - Delinquent behavior often stems from neglect, unstable home environments, and unaddressed trauma.
  - Parental inaction or justification of bullying reinforces harmful behavior.

### **Root Causes Identified:**

- **Family Dynamics:** Lack of emotional support or safety at home can lead children to act out.
- **Socioeconomic Factors:** Children from disadvantaged backgrounds face higher vulnerability.
- **Emotional Neglect:** Children without validation or guidance may seek control through bullying.

### **Way Forward:**

- **Clarity on Definitions:** There's a need to standardize how bullying is understood and addressed.
- **Build Resilience & Awareness:** Teaching emotional skills and promoting inclusive environments is key.
- **Take Action:** Bystanders must move beyond awareness and actively intervene or support victims.

## **2.5: Glee Free Schools, Creating a Safe Learning Environment**

This presentation was presented by Principal of Ghiyasuddin International School and highlighted how bullying is a persistent issue in schools, driven by power imbalances, retaliation, or amusement. Global statistics show:

- 1 in 5 students experience bullying (UNESCO).
- 20% of bullying happens online.
- 70% of teachers witness bullying monthly—raising concerns about the effectiveness of their interventions.
- 20% reduction in bullying seen in schools with structured anti-bullying programs.
- Bullying leads to:
- 10% drop in academic performance.
- 160,000 students skipping school daily due to bullying (U.S. data).
- There is a lack of local data in the Maldives, making it difficult to understand the full extent of the issue.

### **Maldivian Context, Current Efforts and Challenges:**

#### **1. Awareness Programs**

- Conducted by the Ministry of Education to educate students and staff.
- Effectiveness depends on how sustained and interactive these efforts are.

## **2. Counseling Services**

- Included in policy, but:
  - There is a shortage of counselors in schools.
  - Limits the ability to provide emotional and psychological support.

## **3. Community Services**

- Part of the restorative justice approach.
- Poorly implemented; not functioning as intended.

## **4. Restorative Justice Programs**

- Currently used to reduce suspension and expulsion rates.
- Misaligned with school needs—overlooks behavior improvement and reintegration.
- Requires wider application and proper training to be effective.

## **Graduated Consequences Framework**

- First Offense: Warning and counseling.
- Repeated Offenses: Detention and parental meetings to involve families in behavior correction.
- Severe Cases: Suspension or expulsion for physical or prolonged bullying.

Current legislation makes it nearly impossible to suspend students—legal reform is needed.

## **Concerns with Zero-Tolerance Policies**

- Focus too heavily on punishment.
- Don't address underlying causes of conflict or behavior.
- Lack of focus on teaching relationship-building or problem-solving skills.

## **Alternative Approaches**

- Peer mediation empowers students to resolve conflicts.
- Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and mental health awareness often discussed but poorly implemented.
- Schools tend to react to bullying rather than build proactive systems.

## **School Responsibility**

- Schools must lead anti-bullying efforts—not rely solely on police or ministry involvement.
- Need for:
  - Consistent student feedback.
  - Regular training for teachers and leadership.
  - A shift from “report and punish” to “listen and prevent.”

## **Prevention & Intervention Framework**

### **Universal Prevention (can address - 80% of cases)**

- Clear school-wide policies.
- Consistent awareness programs.
- Positive school culture.
- Leadership that listens and responds.

### **Targeted Interventions (- 15%)**

- Focused counseling, peer mediation, and group work.
- Training for student mediators.
- Tailored support for students identified as at-risk

### **Intensive Support (for remaining cases)**

- Professional mental health services.
- Parent involvement and specialized care.
- Collaboration with external agencies.

## **2.6: Key Recommendations: Ensuring a Bully-Free Environment**

- **School-Based Interventions:**
  - Mandate all public and private schools to adopt national anti-bullying guidelines, with monitoring by the Ministry of Education and regional school boards.
  - Incorporate bullying prevention into the Health and Life Skills curriculum, with emphasis on empathy, diversity, and bystander intervention.

- **Student Engagement:**
  - Institutionalize student-led peer support systems in schools through trained peer counselors and school clubs. Leverage the success of youth-led initiatives showcased at the symposium.
  - Revise discipline policies to emphasize restorative approaches (e.g., mediated apologies, reflection journals) rather than punitive suspensions or expulsions.
- **Cyberbullying:**
  - Develop a digital citizenship education module in collaboration with the Maldives National University, targeting students, parents, and teachers.
  - Enforce provisions under the Cybercrime Act to investigate and remove harmful online content directed at children, with support from the Maldives Police Service's cybercrime unit.

## Theme 3: Children and Mental Health

### Keynote Speech:

Keynote speaker, Dr. Najat Maalla, the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children emphasized integrating mental health into all child protection mechanisms. She emphasized three points:

- **Violence and Mental Health:** Violence against children, both online and offline - is widespread and has severe psychological effects including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and even suicide. One adolescent dies by suicide every 11 minutes, and stigma prevents many from seeking help.
- **Underinvestment in Mental Health:** Despite its high human and economic cost, mental health remains underfunded. On average, countries allocate only 2% of national health budgets and 1% of health-related development aid to mental health.
- **Call for Greater Investment and Participation:** Mental health must be integrated into cross-sectoral child protection systems. More funding, evidence-based interventions, and genuine child participation—including peer-led initiatives—are essential.

She concluded with an urgent call to action: with less than six years left to achieve the 2030 Agenda, we must act now—*for and with children*.

### 3.1: Too Tired Too Sleepy: The Negative Impact of Screen Time on Teenagers' Mental Health and School Absenteeism

The first presentation highlighted a research by **Islamic University of Maldives** and the **Children's Ombudsperson's Office** regarding the negative impact of screen time on teenager's mental health and school absenteeism. The key takeaways of the study were:

- **Sleep Disruption:** Many students stayed up past 3:00 AM due to prolonged use of social media (especially TikTok) and online gaming, leading to fatigue and frequent absenteeism.
- **Lack of Effective Supervision:** Despite efforts by parents and teachers, students often bypass screen time restrictions. Adults struggle to enforce limits, especially when students resist waking up for school.

- **Mental Health & Academic Stress:** Excessive screen use correlates with anxiety, stress, and a sense of disconnection from school. Irregular attendance heightens students' fear of falling behind, which further harms their mental well-being.

**Recommendations:**

- Conduct interactive workshops and peer-led programs on managing screen time.
- Promote parental involvement and positive role modeling of screen habits.
- Educate adolescents on sleep hygiene and reducing late-night screen use.
- Launch community awareness campaigns to inform families about the mental health risks of excessive screen use and encourage healthier alternatives.

**3.2: Children and Mental Health Focused Initiatives from NCMH**

Next, the National Centre for Mental Health (NCMH) presented their insights on mental health focused initiatives to children. NCMH reported witnessing a sharp rise in mental health consultations, growing from 7,000 in 2019 to 15,000 by September 2024. Alarming, 22% of these involve children and adolescents, with increasing cases of self-harm among youth. To address this, NCMH has implemented 2 targeted initiatives focusing on both adolescents and younger children highlighted below:

**“DBT Group Therapy for Adolescents (Aged 15–22)”**

**Objective:** To address self-harm and suicidal tendencies among adolescents.

**Program Design:**

- Evidence-based Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), adapted from CBT.
- 17 sessions (1.5 hours each), facilitated by a multidisciplinary team.
- Targeted adolescents with histories of self-harm or repeated hospital admissions.

**Outcomes:**

- Out of 15 participants, 7 completed the full 5-month program.
- No self-harm incidents or hospital readmissions during the program.
- Parents and participants reported emotional improvement and better coping skills.

**Challenges:**

- Limited number of DBT-trained professionals.
- Participant reluctance due to privacy concerns in group settings.
- High dropout rate; some preferred individual therapy.

**“Resilient Friends” Initiative for Children (Aged 4–10)**

**Objective:** Early intervention and emotional literacy among younger children.

**Components:**

- A storybook featuring relatable characters (e.g., Fumi the flying fish, Noni the anxious anemone fish) that teach children to recognize and manage emotions.
- Flashcards for parents, teachers, and caregivers with practical exercises to promote emotional regulation and resilience.

**Distribution Plan:**

- In partnership with the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health, NCMH plans to distribute the storybook and cards to schools, hospitals, NGOs, and other community stakeholders.

**Future Plans:**

- Evaluate the effectiveness of “Resilient Friends.”
- Expand early intervention tools to promote long-term mental health and emotional wellbeing across the Maldives.

NCMH’s dual approach—structured therapy for adolescents and early intervention tools for children—aims to address the growing mental health needs of Maldivian youth through scalable, evidence-based, and community-integrated strategies.

**3.3: Mental Health Services for Children – A Child Rights Perspective**

The **Children’s Ombudsperson’s Office** assessed the state of mental health services for children in the Maldives from a child rights perspective, guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

(UNCRC) and national laws like the Child Protection Act and Juvenile Justice Act. Despite these legal frameworks, significant gaps in implementation persist, particularly in ensuring adequate mental health care for vulnerable children. Key takeaways from this presentation include:

**Social Sector:**

- No clear distinction between clinical and forensic mental health assessments.
- Children in state care lacked access to mental health services.
- Delays in service delivery, especially for vulnerable children.

**Education Sector:**

- Shortage of mental health professionals in schools.
- Lack of anti-bullying programs.
- Inadequate support for children with special needs.

**Health Sector:**

- Services are highly centralized in Malé, limiting access for children in atolls.
- Absence of regulation in the mental health sector, raising ethical concerns.

**Recommendations:**

- Develop standardized care protocols and clear referral pathways.
- Increase mental health training for professionals working with children.
- Introduce early intervention and school-based prevention programs.
- Shift from institutional care to community-based mental health models.

Establish monitoring mechanisms to uphold quality and ethical standards in service delivery.

**3.4: Key Recommendations: Children and Mental Health**

**Strengthen School-Based Mental Health Support:**

- Place trained mental health professionals in all schools, including atolls.
- Integrate mental health and emotional literacy into school curricula.

- Support peer-led and student-led initiatives on wellbeing and screen use.

#### **Regulate and Decentralize Services:**

- Develop national standards and ethical regulations for mental health care.
- Expand services beyond Malé by building regional and atoll-level capacity.

#### **Address the Impact of Social Media Use on Mental Health:**

- Run public campaigns on healthy screen use and mental health.
- Offer workshops for parents and teachers on managing digital habits.
- Collaborate with schools and service providers to limit harmful usage.

#### **Expand Group Therapies and Early Interventions:**

- Scale up DBT and CBT programs for adolescents, especially in outer islands.
- Train more professionals in group-based and trauma-informed care.
- Distribute and monitor early childhood tools like *Resilient Friends* nationwide.

#### **Improve Cross-Sector Coordination:**

- Establish clear referral systems between schools, FCSCs, hospitals, and police.
- Provide joint training for professionals across health, education, and protection.
- Use child-centered case management for vulnerable children.

#### **Strengthen Monitoring and Feedback:**

- Regularly audit services and track implementation of mental health programs.
- Involve children in designing and evaluating services.
- Collect feedback from children and families to improve service delivery.

#### **Cross-Sectoral Integration:**

- Ensure that mental health screenings are part of the standard school health program **in** partnership with the Ministry of Health and NCMH.
- Establish formal referral mechanisms between schools, social services, and health professionals, with clear timelines and follow-up obligations.

## Cross-cutting Recommendations

### **Child Participation**

- Create a “National Children’s Advocate Group” to ensure child input in legislative and policy decisions, with equitable representation from different atolls, age groups, and children with disabilities.
- Require child consultation in all national-level child rights reporting (e.g., UNCRC reporting and alternative reports).

### **Inclusive Data Systems**

- Ensure routine child rights indicators are integrated into government information systems, such as EMIS (Education), DHIS2 (Health), and Juvenile Justice databases.
- Mandate data disaggregation by age, gender, disability, and location across all ministries and publish annual Child Rights Dashboards.

### **Evidence-Based Programs**

- Use findings from the “Growing Up in Maldives” study to guide national strategies on child protection, juvenile justice reform, education quality, and early childhood development.
- Pilot programs at the island level before national rollout, ensuring contextual adaptation to community dynamics and resource availability.