



RASDHOO, MALDIVES

## Aminath Zoonaa gets women into the swim of things

By Anne Pinto-Rodrigues / Contributor

In the shallow, turquoise waters off Rasdhoo island, Aminath Zoonaa gathers a small group of adults – mostly women – around her. “Every Maldivian must learn to swim,” she tells them matter-of-factly.

As the first Maldivian woman in the country accredited as a trainer of swim-and-snorkel instructors, Ms. Zoonaa knows this group has a vital role to play in expanding swimming access. Getting more instructors trained will have a multiplier effect that puts more and more Maldivians – particularly women and girls – into the water.

“I’ve always wanted to find a way to help our communities,” Ms. Zoonaa says, adding that “enabling a person to move around in the water comfortably helps create a long-lasting love for the ocean.”

The training session is part of the Ocean Women program pilot launched by the Manta Trust, a marine conservation nonprofit based in the United Kingdom. Together with the organization’s Flossy Barraud, Ms. Zoonaa is co-leading the program. The duo’s research had identified the lack of trained female swim instructors – among other social and cultural reasons – as one of the main factors keeping girls and women from learning to swim.

### Limited access

Although this is a nation of about 1,200 small coral islands in the Indian Ocean, many Maldivians, particularly women and girls, don’t know how to swim. They not only miss out on the recreational benefits of the ocean but also are ineligible for many jobs in marine conservation and the crucial tourism sector. And because most Maldivians live a short distance from the ocean and must travel regularly among islands using government-operated ferries and private speedboat services, swimming is an essential skill.

“They must be prepared for any incident that could occur during their many journeys from one island to another,” Ms. Zoonaa explains.

Ms. Zoonaa herself was in the ocean from a very young age. She recalls her father, a

professional diver, taking her to the beach in the nation’s capital, Malé, and teaching her to swim. Ms. Zoonaa eventually coached her younger siblings and cousins, and later her own three children, in swimming.

She longed to be certified as a swim instructor. The opportunity arose in 2016, when a swim-instructor trainer from the globally recognized Scuba Schools International (SSI) came to Malé to coach. Ms. Zoonaa seized the chance to take a swim-instructor course and earn her certification. Next, she pursued certification to be a trainer

of swim-and-snorkel instructors, becoming the first Maldivian woman in the country with this credential, according to the local SSI representative.

In 2019, she founded her own business, Salted Venture Swimmers, a swimming school in Malé.

“I started as one person giving swimming lessons to one class early in the morning,” she says. Today, Ms. Zoonaa, along with her team of 10 instructors – both female and male – teaches children from the age of 2 months upward, as well as adults, to swim. “Our classes are full with kids wait-listed,” she says.

### “So much fun”

Ms. Zoonaa has long been aware of the limited opportunities for Maldivians, especially girls and women, to learn swimming. But she wasn’t sure how she could help on a large scale. Then in 2022, when the Manta Trust announced its Ocean Women program to train local women to become swim-and-snorkel instructors, Ms. Zoonaa thought it would be the perfect way to help more islanders become proficient in swimming. She approached Ms. Barraud and offered her expertise.

Ms. Barraud had been on the lookout for a local partner who shared the Manta Trust’s goals of marine conservation and equal access to the ocean. She welcomed Ms. Zoonaa’s interest. “What could be more perfect than a swim school run by a woman?” Ms. Barraud says. The two, each with a unique set of skills, partnered to co-lead the Ocean Women program in the Maldives.

Garnering sign-ups for the pilot proved more challenging than they anticipated. Local women were reluctant to join the program because they lacked confidence in their swimming skills. To address this, every Thursday in the three months before the pilot, Ms. Zoonaa traveled by ferry from her home in Malé to Rasdhoo and offered weekend swimming lessons to get the women comfortable in the water.

“This helped them overcome their fear,” she says.

Eventually, five women from Rasdhoo (and two men from other islands) signed up for the Ocean Women pilot, which was held from Nov. 17 to Nov. 25. In addition to training the group in the water, Ms. Zoonaa also took the participants through various modules of the SSI swim-and-snorkel-instructor course in the classroom. At the end of the program, all the participants appeared for the SSI examination, which they easily passed, and received certification. “The improvement of the participants, and how far they have come in this journey, is mind-blowing,” says Ms. Zoonaa. “I’m happy to have instilled a love for the ocean among them.”

The newly minted swim-and-snorkel instructors adore Ms. Zoonaa. “I really appreciate her patience in teaching us,” says Aminath Shifza, one of the pilot participants. The mother of four recalls how Ms. Zoonaa took the SSI lessons, which are meant for pool learning, and applied them to the waters off Rasdhoo where the cohort received its training. “She made it so much fun,” adds Ms. Shifza.

“Zoonaa is a much-needed role model for Maldivian women who want to become ocean champions,”

says special education teacher Ifasha Abdul Raheem, who has been following the program. Ms. Raheem works at the Baa Atoll Education Centre, a government-run school on Eydhafushi island.

“Not only are the program participants exploring the ocean with more confidence now; they are also teaching others to swim and snorkel,” adds Ms. Raheem, referring to the first learn-to-swim session organized by the graduates on Rasdhoo, in December. Twenty children and five adults from the island signed up for the session, paying nominal fees.

Ms. Barraud, too, acknowledges Ms. Zoonaa’s vital role in the success of the Ocean Women pilot. “This couldn’t have worked without her,” she says.

The duo is already preparing for the next steps. “We plan to create more opportunities for the recently trained swim-and-snorkel instructors and need to find ways to scale up the Ocean Women program,” Ms. Zoonaa says.

Juggling the program, a family, a swimming school, and other responsibilities, Ms. Zoonaa has her hands full. But she is committed to Ocean Women.

“The only way we can safeguard our oceans for future generations is by creating new ocean ambassadors,” Ms. Zoonaa says. ■



**TAKING THE PLUNGE:** Aminath Zoonaa (top photo, wearing a cap) supervises the participants of the Ocean Women program pilot as they train adolescent girls from Rasdhoo island to swim. Ms. Zoonaa (bottom photo, second from left) works with program participants to improve their swimming techniques.



PHOTOS BY ANNE PINTO-RODRIGUES

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– **Aminath Zoonaa**, a trainer of swim-and-snorkel instructors who co-leads the Ocean Women program in the Maldives

