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Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, Public Service, Peoples Charter for Change and Progress, Information, i-Taukei Affairs, Provincial Development, Sugar Industry, Lands and Mineral Resources

**OPENING ADDRESS AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE MAU WOMEN’S CENTRE**

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Mau Village Mon. 29th July, 2013**

**NAMOSI 1100 Hours**

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My fellow Fijians.

*Bula vinaka* and a very good morning to you all. A special welcome to our Indonesian friends who are here with us this morning.

I want to especially acknowledge the presence of the Indonesian Ambassador and the Director-General for Information and Public Diplomacy at the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

It’s my pleasure to be here to officially open the Women’s Resource Centre in Mau - one of the several we are establishing throughout Fiji to empower our women and improve their lives.

As you all know, a cornerstone of my Government’s program is equality for all Fijians - no matter what their ethnicity, religion, geographical location or gender.

We all know that it is far easier to preach the notion of equality between men and woman than it is to achieve it in practice.

Too many men in Fiji still think it’s their right to demean and mistreat women.

Domestic violence is still a major problem. And far too many women are exploited.

Women are generally regarded as someone only to do the cooking and look after the children.

We can never be an equal and fair society if even a single Fijian woman is discriminated against.

My Government has led the battle against discrimination by introducing a raft of new laws to promote gender equality.

We introduced the first domestic violence laws in Fiji’s history.

We have strengthened the rights of the women in this country who live in *“de facto”* relationships.

We have removed the old Victorian rules for corroboration for rape. Our criminal laws are modern and gender neutral.

And we have worked hard to modernise all of our laws to make sure they reflect equality between men and women.

But we all know that it’s one thing to change laws but quite another to change mindsets.

And not just the mindsets of men.

We need to encourage women to stand up for their rights and be empowered.

We need to make them more aware of their own importance in their families and communities.

They are the backbones of their communities.

That’s why it gives me great pleasure to open this facility to give women in a rural community the skills and training they need to better provide for themselves and their families.

This Women’s Resource Centre in Mau is part of my Government’s program to build similar facilities throughout the country.

Each of these centres is specialising in making a particular product.

Here in Mau, the plan is to harvest seaweed and add value to it by producing food items such as tomato sauce, noodles, sausages and juice, plus non-food items such as skin care products and bath soap.

This project has been made possible through our growing relationship with Indonesia, which has provided the personnel to train our people to add value to seaweed.

Ambassador, please convey to your Government our sincere thanks for its assistance, which is deeply appreciated.

The Indonesian seaweed experts have already done one week’s training in Sawakasa, Tailevu and Nagigi, Savusavu. They will begin a two week training program this afternoon here in Mau.

The skills that will be taught are not just important for the women themselves and their communities, but for Fiji’s rural economic development as a whole.

They will receive income that will improve their lives and the lives of their families.

I’d like to thank everyone involved in getting this program off the ground and wish the women of the community well as they empower themselves by gaining these new skills.

With new ideas, new skills and encouragement, we can provide new economic opportunities for the benefit of everyone.

And now, my fellow Fijians, it gives me great pleasure to declare the Mau Women’s Centre officially open.

Vinaka vakalevu and thank you.