

**Rear Admiral J. V. Bainimarama, CF(Mil), OSt.J, MSD, jssc, psc**

**Prime Minister of Fiji and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, the Public Service, People’s Charter and Change and Progress, Information, iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources**

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**SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF THE BUA WOMEN’S RESOURCE CENTRE**

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**Nabouwalu Friday 25th April, 2014**

**BUA**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**The Minister for Social Welfare, Women and Poverty Alleviation,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Women and Men of Bua,**  
Bula vinaka and a very good afternoon to you all.  
  
I’m delighted to be here in Bua for this important event and thank you all for generously hosting my delegation.

I’m especially pleased to be opening yet another of our Women’s Resources Centres, which are designed to empower Fijian women by providing them with a stake in the national economy.

This one will not only serve as a social gathering place for women but a sewing centre for the Province of Bua, in which our women can make clothes and sell them.

The income they receive will not only benefit themselves and their families but provide them with something equally important – a sense of independence and accomplishment.

There’s a wonderful spirit in the other centres I’ve opened under this program – a tremendous sense of women coming together and gaining a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment in making items that other people want to buy.

It doesn’t end here. Because there is no point in producing something worthwhile without linking that product to the marketplace – in other words, introducing the seller to potential buyers. That is why my Government has adopted an integrated approach to the marketing of items made by small or big producers under the Buy Fijian/Fijian Made program. The Ministry of Industry and Trade is specifically charged with teeing people up with the market. And this includes a category called *Fijian Sew*. So I ask you all to strive for excellence in what you produce, to make these items as attractive as you can to enable you to get the highest price you can.

The whole idea of this initiative is to extend the participation of ordinary Fijians, in particular women in our economy into areas of the country that haven’t yet benefited.

So this is a great day for the women of Bua and a great day for Bua as a whole. Because our women are the backbone of every Fijian community and what benefits them benefits everyone. They are our sisters, wives, mothers, grandmothers, aunties and all have a special place in our lives.

I would especially ask the men of Bua to support their womenfolk in participating in this scheme. Encourage them to come here, take an interest in what they do and be proud of the items they make.

There’s an old saying: *From little things, big things grow*. Everyone in the world who started a successful business started small. So, however, modest these centres may seem when they start, we are sowing a seed that has the potential to bloom. And giving ordinary women both an opportunity and a sense of purpose.

So I’m personally very proud of this program. I believe it’s one of the most important things my Government has done – to not just preach the need for more to be done for our women but to do something practical about it.

To deliver an initiative across the nation that has made a real difference to the lives of our women. Extend to them the benefits of economic participation. Give them the tools to work to improve their own lives. Give them the leg-up in life that I keep talking about, not the handouts of the past that ended when the hand was taken away, leaving ordinary people no better off than they were before.

I also want to use this opportunity to repeat an important message to Fijian men that I will keep repeating until we finally get a change in peoples’ attitude. It is time for all of us to think long and hard about the treatment of women in our nation. Because the continuing level of domestic violence in Fiji, of abuse of women, of sexual assault, is shameful – truly a national disgrace.

Back in February, when I opened a Women’s Resource Centre in Kadavu, I revealed some shocking figures on sexual assault – a total of 739 cases before the courts, 262 of these cases against children.

We knew the problem was bad but I was personally staggered to learn of these figures. And I have to tell you something. We should all be ashamed of this. To think that for all our wonderful characteristics as a nation, we have this terribly dark side. The sexual exploitation of our women and children.

Once again this week has come yet another reminder of the shocking incidence of rape in Fiji - this one an alleged gang rape. It has got to stop. We all have to have a good look at ourselves. And I repeat what I said in Kadavu:

The days of any lenient attitude to raping, demeaning, mistreating and exploiting women are over. Through my Government’s initiatives, the Police have adopted a policy of zero tolerance of all violence against women.

Leaving aside these appalling statistics on sexual assault, I say again: if anyone hits or mistreats a woman in any way, they had better watch out. Because we are going to come down on them very hard and they will feel the full force of the law.

Real men don’t hit women. Real men treat women with respect. Care for them. Look out for them. Protect them. Treat them as equals. Encourage them to be heard. Encourage them to fulfill their dreams.

The dream here today is that many more women in Bua can be empowered, both economically through the money they earn and by achieving a sense of personal satisfaction and self worth. As Prime Minister, I very much hope that you embrace the opportunity to learn new skills. That you gain a renewed sense of purpose by benefiting from those skills. And that the benefits flow not only to yourselves and your families but the wider community.

Do not hesitate to seize the opportunity. Do not hesitate to insist on your right to be treated with honour and respect, to be given the freedom to earn a living and live a life free from violence, exploitation and abuse. Right across the board, my Government has either tightened our laws or introduced new ones to give Fijian women an unprecedented level of protection.

We brought in the first domestic violence laws in Fiji’s history. We have strengthened the rights of women who live in defacto relationships. We have removed the old Victorian rules for corroboration of rape. Our criminal laws are now modern and gender neutral and we have worked hard to modernise all our laws to make sure they reflect equality between men and women.

But it is now time – high time - for people to change their mindsets. Especially our men.

So I appeal to our women: Use these laws to protect yourself. Use them to enforce your rights.

In closing, I want to thank everyone involved in getting this project off the ground and now have great pleasure in officially declaring the Bua Women’s Resource Centre open.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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