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**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 TAVUKI WOMEN’S RESOURCE CENTRE**

**Tavuki Village Wednesday, 12th February, 2014**

**KADAVU 1300 Hours**

The Minister for Women;

The Attorney-General;

The Minister for Fisheries and Forests;

The Minister for Youth and Sports;

Representatives of the Vanua;

Distinguished Guests;

Women and Men of Tavuki,

Bula Vinaka and a very good afternoon to you all.

I’m delighted to be in Tavuki and want to warmly thank the people here for their wonderful welcome and for generously hosting my delegation. Ordinary Fijians are the backbone of our nation and ordinary Fijian women especially so. They are our sisters, wives, mothers, grandmothers, aunties and all have a special place in our lives. Which is why it’s a special pleasure for me to be here to officially open the Tavuki Women’s Resource Centre.

I’ve just come from Vunisea where I opened one of the Government’s new Telecentres, which is giving many ordinary people access to the Internet and other telecommunications for the first time. It’s all about empowering ordinary people – both adults and young people - so that they start getting what they deserve – the same level of services as people in Viti Levu, the same level of services of someone living in Suva.

This Women’s Resource Centre is one of several we are establishing throughout Fiji to empower our women and improve their lives. The really wonderful thing about our people is their hospitality to outsiders. It’s made Fijians famous throughout the world. So I’m especially pleased that this particular Resource Centre is doubling up as a guest house. The Government is here to help you in this endeavour and to get all the permits you need to operate.

I also want to use this opportunity to say a few words about the importance of women, in our families and in all our lives. And to make an appeal to our menfolk to think long and hard about the treatment of women in our nation.

What I am about to tell you is a national disgrace and something that should shame every Fijian. Because I’ve just been given some alarming figures about the level of sexual assault in Fiji. It is shocking and it cannot be allowed to continue.

Before our courts at the present time are 739 cases of sexual assault. These are cases pending in all courts, including the Supreme Court and Court of Appeal. 739. Of these 477 are cases of sexual assault against people over the age of 13. But there are another 262 cases of child sexual assault. And the overwhelming majority of all these cases are assaults on females – women and girls.

We knew the problem was bad but not this bad. And it has to stop. The days of any lenient attitude to raping, demeaning, mistreating and exploiting women are over. I am issuing instructions to the police that they are to adopt a policy of zero tolerance of all violence against women. Leaving aside these appalling statistics on sexual assault, 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. They are going to feel the full force of the law.

We can’t keep talking about equal opportunity for everyone and a new and better Fiji if we tolerate our women being abused. Every woman and girl deserves to feel safe, to be respected, to be protected. I want to pay tribute to those communities in Fiji who’ve embraced the Government’s campaign to eradicate domestic violence.

You are leading by example and will get every support from me and the rest of the Government. But the rest of the country needs to fall in line.

We need an urgent revolution in the attitude of men towards women, because that is clearly the problem here. For too long, some Fijian men have seen their women as possessions to be used as they please. For too long, some of these men think that rape is something they can get away with. Sexually assaulting children is something they can get away with. And for too long, many more have used the slap, the punch or the beating as means to control their women. Some people even make jokes about it – that someone or other deserves a slap. It is no joke. It is not funny. It is a national embarrassment and it has to stop.

I want every Fijian man to think long and hard about this and remember one thing above all else. Real men don’t rape women or sexually abuse children. Real men don’t beat women. Weak men beat women. Pathetic men. Men who use violence to get their way. It’s criminal and it’s unacceptable. So I appeal to every Fijian male. Be a man. Treat women properly. Treasure them. Protect them. They are the heart of the family, the backbone of our communities. They are our partners. They are just as important as men. So set an example to your children and treat them in the way they deserve to be treated, the way they must be treated. The same goes for our children. We should be deeply ashamed as a nation that there are 262 child sexual assault cases currently before our courts.

As I’ve said before, we can never be an equal or 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 women who live in defacto relationships. We have re moved 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 now time – high time - for people to change their mindsets. Especially our men. Fijian women must also be encouraged to stand up for their rights, to be empowered. You must no longer accept being mistreated. The law protects you. Use it to enforce your rights.

Today, we gather in Tavuki to celebrate our women here with an initiative to empower them economically. You will learn new skills, new ways of doing things. You will receive income that will improve your lives and the lives of your families. And in doing so, you will get a measure of independence and a great deal of satisfaction.

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

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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