

**REAR ADMIRAL (RET.) JOSAIA VOREQE BAINIMARAMA, CF (Mil), OStJ, MSD, jssc, psc**

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

 **ADDRESS AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE FIRST NATIONAL WOMEN’S EXPO**

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Vodafone Arena Wed. 6th August, 2014

LAUCALA BAY 1000 Hours

**Members of the Cabinet;**

**Ms Bambi Shen – our International Guest Speaker – and your Husband, Mr. Gene Foster;**

**Members of the Diplomatic Corps;**

**Marama ni Yavusa e Viti,**

**Our Women from around Fiji,**

**Invited Guests,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Bula Vinaka, good morning, and welcome!

It’s a great pleasure to be here this morning, amongst all these beautiful women, to launch Fiji’s very first National Women’s Expo.

To say that we’re starting big is an understatement. More than a thousand women from 499 women’s groups around the country are here with us in Suva for three whole days to showcase their products, demonstrate their skills and build new relationships. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever seen more energy and excitement in the Vodafone Arena before. I have no doubt that with this particular group of ladies, we’re in for a wonderful three days and I strongly encourage all Fijians in the Suva-Nausori area not to miss out.

This Expo has been designed to put the nation’s spotlight on the talents of our female artisans, farmers and small businesswomen, particularly those from rural areas. Groups have travelled from villages in all four Divisions to take part.

In addition to the massive public interest this event will generate, the Ministry has arranged for potential investors and buyers to visit the Expo, which we hope will open up new opportunities for many of the women here. On top of that, the Expo will also offer a wide range of training workshops to participants on topics including solar electrification, financial literacy and women’s wellness. I urge all of you to take full advantage of this opportunity to learn new skills while you are here.

Because at its most basic level, this event is about helping real people. Women like Mrs Savita Sharma, President of the Shrest Mothers Club in Samabula, who has come with 30 women from her group to showcase their home-made products, including the sweets they make, which I for one am looking forward to trying. These are our mothers, sisters, wives, grandmothers and aunties and this Expo is for them.

I’m particularly proud to see groups coming here with products they’ve made at the Women’s Resource Centres my Government has been opening around the country – including the group from Buretu who are here to sell their coconut products. This has been one of our flagship initiatives and under the Minister’s guidance, we’ve been able to build or extend 58 centres throughout Fiji, which are empowering women by providing them with a stake in the national economy.

Related to these centres, of course, are the livelihood projects the Ministry has been conducting in rural, maritime and informal settlements, which have a similar aim to teach women skills that allow them to participate in the national economy. Indeed, we believe rural women are a crucial part of the Fijian economy with the contribution they are making through small and medium enterprises. And so our efforts are targeted at offering them the skills, guidance, and resources they need to continue to grow this contribution.

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

However, we understand that our assistance can’t end there. There is no point producing something worthwhile without linking that product to the marketplace – in other words, introducing sellers to potential buyers. That’s one of the key purposes of this Expo. But that’s also why my Government has adopted a big-picture approach to the marketing of items made by Fijians under the Buy Fijian/Fijian Made program.

Under this program, the Ministry of Industry and Trade is specifically charged with helping you market your products to locals and tourists alike. In return, we ask participants to strive for excellence in what they produce, to make their items as attractive as they can. Because this not only raises the price they receive for them, but it also helps us elevate the *“Fijian Made”* brand by linking it with quality and authenticity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I also want to take this opportunity to say a few words about the importance of women, in our families and all our lives.

Earlier this year, we launched Fiji’s National Gender Policy, one of the first of its kind in the region. This policy represented a pledge to the Fijian people about our commitment to gender equality, equity and social justice in future policy-making and national development.

Indeed, the policy now clearly articulates the approach my Government has adopted since day one. Right across the board, we have 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 *de facto* relationships. We have removed the old Victorian rules for corroboration of rape. No longer does a rape victim’s sexual history have any bearing on the case, nor is *bulubulu* accepted to simply let the perpetrators of crimes free. 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. Indeed, the supreme law of our country, the Fijian Constitution, says that all Fijians are equal, no matter where they are born, their race, their age, or their gender.

It clearly states that no person can be discriminated against, directly or indirectly, on account of his or her gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

But, as I’ve said before, it’s one thing to change laws, it’s quite another to change mindsets. Government can’t do this alone. A top down approach by itself won’t cut it.

Because unfortunately, the treatment of women is still a very real issue in our society. Too many women face workplace harassment. Too many women are obstructed by a glass ceiling in their professional careers. Too many women suffer domestic violence and sexual abuse at the hands of their male partners and relatives.

It’s one thing for the Police and authorities to adopt a policy of zero-tolerance, as I have instructed, but it’s just as important for each of us to adopt a policy of zero-tolerance in our personal lives as well.

In order to truly tackle this problem, we need an army of ordinary citizens – the grassroots – to stand together with us and say: *enough is enough*. To insist that all Fijians are treated with honour and respect, that they are given the freedom to earn a living and live a life free from violence, exploitation and abuse.

There are many people out there, men and women alike, who are leading the way, doing positive work and setting a wonderful example.

I am particularly encouraged by the *Marama ni Yavusa,* women holding chiefly roles from across the country who have agreed to work with the Ministry to strengthen their leadership skills so that they can become spurs for change and development in their communities. These women will emerge as strong advocates for all they serve, but perhaps most important, they will be able to speak up for women and exert influence on women’s development in rural areas of the country.

I understand that 50 of these *Marama* are in Suva for their first training Summit, which runs in parallel to this Expo. I wish them all the best.

And, of course, there are the 37 communities in Fiji who’ve embraced Government’s campaign to eradicate domestic violence. 117 so-called gatekeepers from these communities are here with us this week for specialised training. To these people I say, *“You are leading by example and will get every support from me and my Government*.” The rest of the country needs to fall in line behind you. We need more people and communities who are willing to set a positive example and join us in our campaign against discrimination and violence.

I would like to leave you all with this final thought: we can never be an equal or a fair society if even a single Fijian is discriminated against. It is high time for Fijians to stand up for their rights and the rights of their fellow citizens. To not accept seeing others mistreated or being mistreated themselves. The law projects all Fijians. Use it to enforce your rights.

Only then can you truly take advantage of this wonderful time in Fiji’s history. Tuition-free education and scholarship and Government loans for university; subsidised bus fares; huge levels of rural development, including energy and water projects across the country. These things and so much more are expanding horizons for ordinary Fijians like never before. Don’t allow the ones you love to miss out by living under a shadow of doubt, fear and mistrust in their personal lives. Help us free them and make the future for all Fijians.

Before finishing my remarks, I would like to extend a special acknowledgment and thank-you to the Ministry for Social Welfare, Women and Poverty Alleviation for making today a reality.

With those words, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is now indeed my great pleasure to wish you all a successful three days and to declare the inaugural National Women’s Expo open.

Vinaka Vakalevu. Thank you.

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