



Honourable J.V. Bainimarama, CF (Mil), OSt.J, MSD, jssc, psc

Prime Minister of Fiji and Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Sugar Industry

SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF PACIFIC WOMEN PARLIAMENTARY PARTNERSHIP FORUM

Novotel Hotel
LAMI

Wed. 29 April, 2015
0830 Hours

Honourable Speakers;
Honourable Ministers;
Honourable Senators;
Honourable Members of Parliament;
Distinguished Guests;
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I'm delighted to be here to officially open the Pacific Women Parliamentary Partnership Forum and to welcome our distinguished international guests to Fiji.

There are 30 Pacific women Parliamentarians with us from the Cook Islands, the Federated States of

Micronesia, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Palau, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

In addition, we welcome a further 21 Parliamentarians from Australia and New Zealand. To all of you, I say on behalf of the Fijian people: It is an honour and privilege to have you in our country and we extend our warmest of greetings.

As you know, this Forum is being hosted by the Speaker of the Fijian Parliament, the Honourable Dr. Jiko Luveni, with support from the Pacific Women Parliamentary Partnership.

Dr. Luveni – as many of you will also know - is the first woman Speaker of the Fijian Parliament. And her appointment - when our new Parliament met for the first time after the election last September - was a source of pride not only for Fijian women but for the entire nation.

Today is cause for further celebration as we welcome each of you as standard-bearers for the cause of women throughout the region.

You gather here in Suva to discuss a crisis we must all address as a matter of urgency. – the appalling incidence of family violence in the Pacific. It is an issue of vital importance for every society, every government. And it is a fundamental test of our values as Pacific people which, I am sad to say, we are failing. Because the current level of domestic violence in our midst is woefully, unacceptably high. It is, in fact, cause for regional shame. And we must all do a lot more to stop it.

The Government I lead takes this issue extremely seriously. Tackling domestic violence is at the core of our efforts to improve the position and status of Fijian women generally. To empower them. To give them more of a stake in our economy. To enrich their lives and those of their families. To enable them to reach their

full potential. And above all, to provide them with an environment free from intimidation and fear.

At a government level, we have zero tolerance for domestic violence in Fiji. Whether it is men beating women, women attacking men, parents hitting children. It is not acceptable full stop. And we have given instructions to all the instruments of State that the perpetrators of domestic violence are to be subject to the full force of the law.

For too long, Fijian society – in common with other Pacific societies – has turned a blind eye to what goes on in the privacy of people’s homes. Worse, we’ve tolerated, even encouraged, a culture in which spouses or partners are entitled to use violence to resolve disputes or bring supposedly errant family members into line. For too long, there was a saying in Fiji that so-and-so “*deserved a hiding*”. But those days are over.

Put simply, there is no excuse whatsoever for our men to treat women badly. And while we know that some women can also be capable of violence in a family setting, the overwhelming majority of cases involve violence by men against women. And, of course, violence against children – the most vulnerable of all.

Here in Fiji, the issue is a burning one after a string of incidents in which women have been killed. In the latest, we lost one of Fiji's best and most respected journalists, Losana McGowan, in an alleged incident of domestic violence that shocked not only those who knew her but the entire nation.

Yet these killings are merely the most obvious manifestations of a culture that we know extends across the Pacific of men resorting to violence against women in domestic confrontations. The days of sweeping the extent of this crisis under the proverbial mat for cultural reasons or to save face are over. The time for action to bring this scourge to an end is long overdue.

I'm very pleased that you have chosen to make this issue the theme of this gathering. And I urge you all – no matter where you come from – to use this Forum to send the strongest possible message to the region and the world that domestic violence in the Pacific is now a matter not only for legitimate public discussion in our societies but that zero tolerance is the only option.

Where there is a reluctance to confront the extent of the problem, we need to force it onto our national agendas. And where there is a lack of political will to address family violence, those governments and politicians must be shamed into action.

Men must be repeatedly told what I tell our menfolk in Fiji: that real men don't hit women. Real men protect women and treat them as equals. And women need to be encouraged to stand up more for themselves – to keep repeating the mantra that violence is unacceptable in any setting whatsoever, let alone the family. Which is the heart of every society and ought to be a place devoid of conflict.

A place of love and acceptance in which our children can be reared and every family member can be safe.

Your Excellency, Honourable Ministers, Speakers, Senators and Members of Parliament, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen;

I'm proud of my own Government's record in this area and pledge before you all today to redouble our efforts to change our own culture of accepting the unacceptable.

Six years ago, my Government enacted the Domestic Violence Decree, a series of landmark provisions that had been put before previous governments for fifteen years but had been ignored. The first draft was formulated in 1994. The second nearly a decade later. But because of a shocking lack of political will, this draft lay gathering dust until my Government pulled it off the shelves and finally enacted its provisions in 2009.

This delay of 15 years speaks volumes about our own cultural attitudes in Fiji at the time. But my Government has a proud record in this area which we have

strengthened across the board by either tightening existing laws or introducing new ones to give Fijian women an unprecedented level of legal protection.

As well as introducing 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 the corroboration of rape. No longer does a rape victim's sexual history have any bearing on a case. Nor are peace offerings accepted to let the perpetrators of crimes go free.

Our criminal laws are modern and gender neutral. And the supreme law of our nation, the Fijian Constitution, establishes once and for all that all Fijians are equal no matter who they are or where they come from.

Our domestic violence law allows any person to apply for a Domestic Violence Restraining Order or DVRO. And any such application is regarded with the utmost seriousness and dealt with as a matter of urgency.

The Police have been instructed and trained never to turn away applicants for DVROs or to attempt to counsel anyone against making such an application.

In the Courts, even before a plea is taken on a charge of assault, the presiding magistrate or judge will ask if there is a domestic relationship between the parties, which includes extended family and clan affiliation. If the answer is yes, an interim DVRO is imposed as a matter of course. And the assault charge and the DVRO proceedings take place simultaneously.

This is not to say that we have solved the problem of family violence. On the contrary, there is far too much evidence of our failure to do so. Because our revised legal framework needs, above all, to be accompanied by a change in the attitudes of both individuals and society generally. And as every woman in this room knows, that is a test we are still failing.

Among other things, we need to do a lot more in our schools to educate our young people that violence generally is unacceptable as a means to resolve conflict and in the home as much as anywhere else.

Each of you know what a challenge this is in the Pacific context. But it is a crisis that we must confront and I hope that the exchange of ideas you will have here this week helps take us in the direction that every Pacific society must take.

Your Excellency, Honourable Ministers, Speakers, Senators and MPs, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen;

We are only now in Fiji setting out on the path of genuine gender equality but it is a goal we intend to fulfil. We give thanks as a nation to those women pioneers in the ranks of our Members of Parliament – Adi Losalini Dovi - our first woman member - Irene Jai Narayan, Loma Livingstone to name but a few.

At 13.4 per cent, Fiji is currently slightly ahead of the Pacific average in the representation of women in our Parliament. As I've mentioned, we have a distinguished woman as Speaker and opposite me in the House, I face the first female Leader of the Opposition. I have four women holding portfolios in my own Government – two Ministers and two Assistant Ministers. The Secretary General to Parliament and her Deputy in the Parliamentary Secretariat are also women.

While this is an encouraging trend, I am the first to concede that we have a long way to go to achieving true equality. And I commit myself and my Government to doing a lot more to achieve a balance as the months and years progress.

Pacific women have always been extremely influential behind the scenes but all over the region, they are finding a new voice in public life and we must do everything possible to make that voice heard.

I'm delighted to join you today as you give new voice to the issue of domestic violence. Again, welcome to our capital and I now have great pleasure in declaring the Pacific Women Parliamentary Partnership Forum open.

Thank you - Vinaka vakalevu.
