



Official Statement

Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation

Honorable Mereseini Vuniwaqa

Workshop on Addressing Domestic Violence and Gender Justice during COVID 19

Tuesday, 25th August, 2020

Salutation:

His Grace Archbishop Peter Loy Chong of the Archdiocese of Suva

Members of the Civil Society Organizations and Development Agencies

Representatives of the Fiji Police Force

Representatives of the of the Archdiocese Fiji, Rotuma and Kiribati

Invited Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen

Introduction:

It is my pleasure to be with you all this morning as we gather to open the first ever regional workshop Addressing Domestic Violence and Gender Justice during COVID 19. My hearty thanks to the Church for inviting me to be a part of this important event, and I take this time to convey my heartfelt congratulations to the Women's Ministry of the Caritas Archdiocese of Suva for having achieved this milestone of organizing a regional level workshop and I am very pleased that the agenda of the workshop is something that is so close to my heart, and is indeed one of the most important priority areas in human development overall.

As COVID19 grips the world, market economies have shuttered, schools have had to be closed, and nearly half of the global population had been or still is confined to their homes. For Fiji, the experience was the same and while today we are a success story of how we managed the spread of the virus in the country, the unprecedented implications of COVID19 on our lives, economy, society and people remains, and is likely to continue for a very long time.

Gendered Impact of COVID19

The COVID19 crisis is indeed a systemic human development crisis, compounding risks to progress towards gender equality. While the COVID19 crisis affects everyone, women and girls face specific and often disproportionate economic, health, and social risks due to deeply entrenched inequalities, social norms, and unequal power relations. Understanding the gender-differentiated impacts of the COVID19 crisis is

fundamental to designing responses that reduce vulnerable conditions and strengthen women's agency, placing gender equality at their center. This is not just about rectifying long-standing inequalities but also about building a more just and resilient world and we are so thankful for our civil society partners for coming on board to do their bit in doing so. The immediate effects of COVID19 on gender inequality are already showing themselves on the burden of unpaid care work and off course gender-based violence.

Gender Based Violence

The purpose of this workshop is to address the current issues of gender justice with specific reference to domestic violence during these COVID times. The issue of gender based violence in Fiji is already a matter of grave concern as Fiji's statistics on Violence against Women rates amongst the highest in the world. Based on the National Domestic Violence helpline 1560 data in April, there had been a significant increase in calls. It was recorded total of 87 calls in February and 187 calls in March. In April we had 527 genuine calls to the national helpline. 66% of the callers were women and 44% men. 54% of calls were domestic violence related and 30% related to COVID-19. Close to 50% of women were 'reporting' a correlation between COVID-19 and an increase of violence, linked directly to the restrictions of movement and economic strains on families. The domestic violence being reported were serious - close to $\frac{3}{4}$ of women reported physical violence, including some extremely serious forms of violence such as being punched, kicked, and hit by stones and timber.

What Government through MWCPA is doing in relation to GBV:

Earlier this year, Fiji embarked on an historic mission to develop a National Action Plan (NAP) to Prevent Violence Against all Women and Girls (2021-2026), making it the first Pacific Island Country and one of the only two countries globally, to have whole of government, inclusive, evidence-based approach to prevent violence against all women and girls. We recognize, in order to solve a national problem, there must be an evidenced-based as well shared understanding among us Fijians for what causes it. The National Action Plan will explain, using data and evidence, what the root cause of violence against all women and girls is in Fiji, and what additional contributing factors that makes the violence more likely to happen.

Government has established the Domestic Violence Act and reforms in the Crimes Act to better address the gaps in addressing gender based violence and provides for justice for survivors and rehabilitation/punishment of perpetrators.

Government funds the operations of toll free helplines to make reporting easier and at this juncture I encourage the use of our Child Helpline 1325 and Domestic Violence Helpline 1560, whereby callers are assisted through a referral system for cases of violence and abuse against women and children. I would like to only encourage all Fijians to not turn a blind eye when they see abuse happening – not ignore such a scenario saying, 'it's their personal matter'. Sexual abuse and domestic violence are criminal acts and it is not a personal matter. If you see it happening, report it.

Role of Faith Based Organizations in Addressing GBV:

The target audience is community members from catholic faith based, ecumenical and interfaith networks – and I cannot emphasize enough how important . Violence against women and girls including sexual offences is rooted in gender-based discrimination, social norms, cultural attitudes and gender stereotypes that perpetuate such violence. Therefore, I believe that faith based organizations are a very powerful player in really getting this message across and leading a national conversation to influence the public discourse on the root causes and contributing factors of violence against women and girls in Fiji and a problem that can be prevented as 84% of the world's population affiliate themselves with a religion – meaning you have immense power and reach to influence thoughts of the followers in order for them to ditch abusive and violent behavior.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, there is no doubt that the action to stop violence against women and girls in Fiji must be taken now; and it must happen in full force and through every possible avenue. The numerous tragedies of Fijian women losing their lives at the hands of men who promised to love and protect them, reminds us time and again that we must keep working together to change our culture and attitudes that are embedded in men and boys' power and control over women, gender inequality, gender discrimination and patriarchy. The Government of Fiji will keep working with all relevant stakeholders towards a society free from violence. I

emphasize that violence against women, girls and children is preventable, not inevitable – and we all shall and can play our part. Violence against women and girls starts with disrespectful behavior and discriminatory attitudes and we have to change it. By recognizing, calling out and preventing these attitudes, we can all play a role in stopping it before it starts.

With these words, I would like to now declare the Caritas Archdiocese Women's Ministry's Workshop on Addressing Domestic Violence and Gender Justice during COVID 19 officially open.

I wish you all the best.

Thank you