



**FIJI'S OPENING STATEMENT AT THE 69<sup>TH</sup> SESSION CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE WITH THE UN  
CEDAW COMMITTEE IN GENEVA**

**THE MINISTER FOR WOMEN, CHILDREN & POVERTY ALLEVIATION**

**HON. MERESEINI VUNIWAQA**

**23<sup>rd</sup> February, 2018**

**10:00 AM**

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**The Chairperson,  
Esteemed Members of the CEDAW Committee,  
Ladies and Gentlemen**

*Bula* Vinaka and warm greetings from the Fijian Government and the Fijian people. The Fijian Government is grateful for this opportunity to share with the Committee the progress made by Fiji in the implementation of CEDAW. The Fijian delegation includes the Permanent Secretary for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation – Dr Josefa Koroivueta, the Acting Director for Women – Ms Selai Koroivusere, Ms Amelia Nairobi and Ms Aradhana who are research officers, Ms. Seema Chand – Senior Legal Officer of the Office of the Solicitor General, Ms Alumeci Tuisawau – Director Technology and Employment Skills Training of the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts and Dr. Torika Tamani – our National Advisor on Family Health. We look forward to an interactive dialogue on Fiji's progress, challenges and aspirations, as we continue to work towards the achievement of gender equality and empowerment of women.

**Madam Chairperson**

My introductory statement will briefly canvass key areas of national development which impact on the provisions of CEDAW which may not have been covered in the Reports before the Committee.

In the last 12 years Fiji has undertaken extensive legal reforms. These reforms were undertaken to ensure that our laws reflect international best practice. The Fijian Constitution which came into force on 7 September 2013 is an expression of the will of the Fijian people as it was the result of wide and robust consultations throughout the nation. Both oral and written submissions were received from individuals, groups, and other interested parties.

Fiji is proud to highlight that the 2014 General Elections held under the 2013 Constitution saw an 84% of registered voters exercising their right to vote. Of the total registered voters in the last election 49.19% were women. There was a record low of 0.75% of invalid votes and the high voter turnout demonstrated the enthusiasm of the electorate and indeed the strength of the new electoral system including the effectiveness of the civic education programs conducted through the Electoral Commission. Fiji will be having her second general election under the 2013 Constitution this year. Apart from specific training and awareness targeted at women and new voters steps have also been taken to encourage the participation of persons living with disabilities in the electoral process.

It is also noteworthy that more women than ever before (44 in total constituting 17.7% of total candidates) stood as candidates in the 2014 elections. Apart from changing attitudes and legal reforms propelled by the Fijian Government, the new electoral system which allows for proportional representation through an open list resulted in the highest number of elected women in parliament in our national history - 14% of members of Parliament being women. Whilst we acknowledge that we still have a long way to go in this area, we believe that a concerted national effort for the empowerment of women across all sectors will produce better results election after election.

The UN HC on HR recently stated that Fiji could do more in relation to the representation of women in Parliament. We agree. In all elections since independence (1970) women secured fewer than 12% of seats in Parliament.<sup>1</sup> Apart from the impact of cultural gender stereotyping and other socio-economic reasons, the low number of females in parliament can also be attributed to the electoral systems that existed previously in Fiji which favoured men further isolating female candidates from being voted into Parliament. Coupled with this is the fact that our previous electoral systems were race-based favouring some communities more over others.

Fiji's new form of proportional representation voting system which considers the entire country as one constituency and sits on the premise of one person one vote was tested for the first time in 2014 delivering 14% of women into parliament. The highest number ever in our history. We are heading back into elections in a few months time and what we see as the need right now is to encourage political parties to include more women candidates of merit in their line-up. Our electoral system is young – it has only been tested once and has proven to be conducive for the increased representation of women in Parliament when coupled with continuing work by government and NGOs to deal holistically with the

socio-economic barriers which become an obstacle for the participation of women in the electoral process.

**Madam Chairperson**

I must mention the exciting benefits in the preparatory work for this constructive dialogue. We now have a strong sense on data that inform us on the evidence based realities that will be most valuable to plan and coordinate the national efforts on both the empowerment of women and on gender equality in Fiji.

This preparatory work has laid a stronger foundation in bringing together agencies of government, the private sector, civil societies and religious organisations whereby we can attain a united frontier to tackle barriers that hinder the advancement of women in all settings.

There is no question on the strong political commitment to empower Fijian Women and on the condemnation of the violence against our women and our children. Our Honorable Prime Minister has labeled the high rates of violence against women and children as a national shame and has made a call to action to all stakeholders to unite in the battle against the violence on women and children.

This “call to action” has created a national movement and already we have seen the private sector organisations joining forces for the first Man Up Campaign engineered to awaken male involvement in the national campaign. Furthermore we activated a national forum in 2017 enable the cooperation of religious organisations. This was a totally new initiative for we felt that they can play a huge role in the battle against the violence on women and children.

**Madam Chairperson**

The participation of women in positions of leadership in the workforce and in social settings is one such area that we aim to focus on going forward. Given the larger proportion of women in critical professional sectors like education, health, the law and the civil service in its entirety, the challenge we need to work around is the removal of barriers which become a hurdle in their progression to leadership positions. Whilst affirmative action would get us there overnight, Fiji believes in a more holistic progression which effectively removes socio-economic barriers as we develop.

**Madam Chairperson**

To effectively implement our CEDAW obligations in Fiji, the Ministry is currently in the process of re-establishing the 4 Taskforces under the Women’s Plan of Action namely, Equal Participation in Decision-making, Formal Sector Employment and Livelihoods, Access to Services and Women and the Law. To that end, we thank the NGOs for their insistence to us to do this. We envisage that this will create the needed space to strengthen our partnership with civil society giving initiatives for the attainment of gender equality a more holistic overview. So far, only one Taskforce is in operation – the Elimination of Violence

Against Women taskforce which has done a lot of work in the area of mandate including the finalization of a Service Delivery Protocol to consolidate a guide to a seamless handling of GBV cases by relevant stakeholders. This Protocol is one piece of a matrix for combating violence against women and will be launched on the International Women's Day this year.

Madam Chair, the fact that Fiji has one of the highest statistics in the world on domestic violence has pushed us as a nation to address domestic violence as a matter of national importance across all sectors. Our statistics in this area have been labeled as a "national shame" by our Hon. Prime Minister. It is!

The UN HC on HR in a recent visit addressed violence against women in Fiji as follows:

***"The high rate of violence against women remains one of the biggest human rights problems in Fijian society, in spite of important steps taken by the Government to combat it, including through the establishment of a national helpline on domestic violence."***

A lot has been done and continues to be done by Government with excellent support from civil society. We have formed strong important alliances with NGOs in our common quest to combat GBVs. As a Government we acknowledge that the fight against GBV must be multifaceted and multi-sectoral. We acknowledge that we cannot fight GBV on our own. We acknowledge that even if we have the best laws and policies in place, more needs to be done in order to eradicate GBV from our midst. The key in our humble view lies in the changing of mentalities. And when we talk about mentalities, we are talking about culture and religion among other things – influencing culture and religion to remove gender stereotyping and the encouragement of "hyper-masculinity" (as the UN HC for HR calls it) in a country which is deeply cultural and religious is no easy feat. It is not impossible. It will require strong partnerships with cultural and religious leaders to foster the principle of non-violence which are tenets of all religions and cultures which make up our Fiji.

### **Madam Chair**

Fiji had just launched its 5-year and 20-year National Development Plan during COP23, having to be the first development plan that prioritizes areas for Gender Equality with policies to: increase women's participation in formal sector employment; increase women's representation at all level of government and civil society; eliminate violence against women and children through responsive policing and coordinated referral networks; improve women's access to all social services; and review of legislation and policies. The emphasis laid on gender equality within the national plan fortifies the belief of the Fijian Government that there can be no holistic development without women and the acknowledgement that women need to be part of the discussion for inclusive economic growth.

## **Madam Chair**

The Fijian Parliament has been running programs to create an enabling environment for women in politics; for instance, the Mock Women's Parliament to encourage potential women leaders especially young women to enter the political arena; and the "Meet the Speaker" Program, where the Honorable Speaker visits communities and consults directly with women in the community to encourage them to become politicians and parliamentarians.

There are programs that include the engagement of Male Advocates in the Public and Private Sectors and in the Communities to eliminate all forms of discrimination against Women as we see men as an important stakeholder in a patriarchal society like Fiji.

The National Women's machinery identifies that gender stereotypes are also prevalent in the formal sectors and as such is now reaching out to civil service organizations and defense forces through our gender sensitization trainings and initiatives. A good example of this was the first ever training of this nature that was funded by the National Women's Machinery and facilitated by the Fiji Women's Crisis Center for the Royal Fiji Military Force in 2017. A similar training had also been conducted for all Permanent Secretaries across Government before the roll out of the National Gender Policy implementation.

## **Madam Chairperson**

To complement our national efforts towards the recognition of rights of persons with disabilities, Fiji ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in June 2017. A Bill to implement the provisions of the Convention into national law is current before Parliamentary Standing Committee. In anticipation of our national obligations towards this Convention, Fiji for the first time in its history allocated a budget for disability allowances. A budget was also allocated to make municipal footpaths accessible to wheelchairs. Moreover, our national census last year for the first time recorded data on persons living with disabilities which would be critical in the making of informed policy in this area.

As part of measures to address the issue of trafficking of persons, Fiji has in 2017 become a party to the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crimes and Its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. The will to address this mode of exploitation of women is real. Strengthened partnerships with relevant stakeholders is needed to effectively address this phenomenon on a national level and we commit to this as a Ministry.

**Madam Chairperson**, in the area of education, we are pleased to inform that Fiji's score on the National Gender Gap Index of 2017 in relation to education is 0.99. Education is a Constitutional right for all Fijians and the Fijian Government, is committed to building a smarter nation through the implementation of various initiatives in this sector. These initiatives have seen pregnant school girls being encouraged to

return and complete their education. A current initiative under the Ministry of Education is the active search and identification of school-drop outs and re-enrolling these students into school to continue their education where they left off.

The Fijian Government's initiatives are also reflected in the increasing budget allocation towards the Education Ministry annually, with the introduction of the free bus fare and free textbooks for all students; and free milk and weetbix program for year 1 students. The Education Ministry also places great importance on early childhood education which has today become a compulsory part of most primary schools. Madam Chairperson, this week back homes, Fiji is for the first time hosting the 20<sup>th</sup> Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers with the sub themes in climate change and ICT.

The Ministry of Education through its Curriculum Council continues to review and revise its education materials and syllabi. Recently the Curriculum Council has been reviewing and revising textbooks with a gender perspective to ensure the removal of gender stereotyping from materials which can further inculcate gender inequality in the minds of our children. Also, the 5- year & 10- year National Development Plan for Fiji highlights that school curriculum will continuously be reviewed and strengthened to achieve national objectives, and equality is one of them.

#### **Madam Chairperson**

According to 2017 Census figures, our Labour Force participation rate, is 76.4% for Males and 37.4% for Females, while the Unemployment rate is 2.9% for Males and 7.8% for women. These latest census figures now requires us as a Ministry to work with the Ministry of Employment to ensure that relevant measures to address the marked difference in figures for labour force participation is included in the National Employment Policy which is currently under review.

#### **Madam Chairperson**

A key achievement of the Fijian Government in the past year was the successful steering of COP 23 by the President of COP – our Honourable Prime Minister. Our efforts on the international stage is complemented by national initiatives to make Fiji a climate resilient nation.

Under the leadership of our Prime Minister, in February 2016 the Fijian Government commissioned a site to establish the Fiji Barefoot Vocational College. The College will be the first of its kind in the Pacific Region. It will be a life-changing project that will greatly complement the government's poverty alleviation strategies to empower rural women as agents of change in building a more climate resilient Fiji. It is envisaged that this Vocational College will also become a regional training facility for women once established.

The increasing intensity of cyclones and its heavy impact on women and children has necessitated Gender-responsive plans for village relocations ensuring that the interests of women are considered.

### **Madam Chairperson**

In terms of social protection, women are now recognized as heads of households and have been able to receive the social protection allowances under the Poverty Benefit Scheme which earlier perceived men to be heads of households. Aside from this program, women who fall in the disability or elderly categories can receive individual allowances under the Disability Allowance and Social Pension Scheme respectively. In assisting children who live in poverty, Government also provides Care and Protection Allowances, without any gender bias to support their education and welfare needs.

### **Madam Chairperson**

The Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism has been assisting aspiring entrepreneurs with a \$1000 grant to start up their small businesses. 40% of the recipients, which is 7,209 so far have been women. Further the Fijian Government has just introduced the Youth Entrepreneurship Scheme (YES) to assist aspiring youth entrepreneurs with their business prospects with up to \$20,000 grants. The first batch of recipients from January 2018 was made up of 1 woman and 4 men and we anticipate more young women to take advantage of this program.

### **Madam Chairperson**

The good health of the Fijian people is a top priority for Government. The Government of Fiji through the Ministry of Health & Medical Services has made provision for the improvement in infrastructure, equipment and services targeted specifically at women's health needs. In recognising the need for support for our women in the hard to reach rural areas, upgrade of health centers in two of our most remote highlands (ie. Navosa & Bukuya) is taking place. This is to ensure that inpatient maternal health services is made available to our women in these rural setting. Moreover, Government recently opened a new specialized birthing unit, a first for Fiji, a facility that will be managed solely by trained and experienced midwives for the provision of uncomplicated maternal health services such as antenatal care, labour & delivery services and post natal care services independent of Doctor. The provision of these service is based on the evidence that our Fiji midwives are competent and fully capable of providing these services and also most importantly in allowing the full management of a low risk birthing unit to women. This birthing unit will be serving a population of more than 70,000 people in the area.

Recognising the expertise and value of our retired women nurses and midwives the Government of Fiji with the assistance of our donor partners, have mobilised more than twenty retired officers as surge capacity to provide maternal and child health services in disaster affected countries in the region eg. Post TC Pam in Vanuatu in 2014, and locally post TC Winston in 2016. The government is committed to continue utilizing this very valuable resource in the region and locally should the need arise.

Leadership in health is dominated by women

Targeted health services for the benefit of Fijian women has been internationally recognized in the Health and Survival scorecard of the Global Gender Gap Index where Fiji has scored 0.97.

**Madam Chairperson**

All our legislation, policies and programs are for rural women as much as they are for other women. However, we recognize that the challenge for rural women is to adequately access most of the services. To address this, the Ministry of Women in partnership with UNDP has implemented the REACH Program to take basic services like social protection application, legal aid and registration of births to rural Fijians right where they are. To complement this, Government spending on infrastructure development in the rural areas has been unprecedented – giving rural women better access to public and private sector services.

**Madam Chairperson**

I have described the progress the Fijian Government has made in supporting Fijian women to fulfill their aspirations. Women in Fiji are taking great strides in various fields. Fiji recognizes that enhancing the status of women is a continuous process and remains committed to this effort. We will continue to review and address the gaps in our efforts to realise true gender equality as envisaged under CEDAW. We therefore look forward to this constructive dialogue and the concluding observations which we are sure will provide a real guide to our national efforts to comply with the CEDAW in its entirety.

Let me conclude by reiterating that Fiji, remains committed to the effective implementation of CEDAW. We know that our progress would not be possible without the concerted effort between the Fijian Government and various other development partners, non-government actors and civil society organisations. We thank these stakeholders for their efforts in boosting the efforts of Government on our path to realizing the goals of CEDAW.

My delegation and I look forward to a meaningful and fruitful dialogue with the Committee.

Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> Usman Shazia, *Where are the women candidates during elections? A Fiji media study*, Pacific Journalism Review 19(1) 2013 at p.148