



KEYNOTE ADDRESS ON GENDER IN THE PACIFIC
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Excellencies

Distinguished delegates and participants

Development Partners

Representatives of academic institutions

Representatives of civil society and private sector organisations

Students

Ladies and gentlemen

It is a pleasure to be speaking this morning as part of what is described as the premier forum for the discussion of important policy issues in the region; and I acknowledge the opportunity offered us by the Australian National University to engage in the Pacific Update forum.

Talofa lava, Nisa Bula Vinaka, good morning and I extend to you all warm greetings from the Pacific Community!

Ladies and gentlemen, this forum provides an opportunity for us to explore some of the key development and policy issues pertinent to our region; including on regionalism, gender equality, economic development, climate change, labour mobility and resource management. It allows us a platform to unpack these issues to some extent, and the conversation we had at the gender panel discussion yesterday, also helped us reflect on the intersectionality of these issues demonstrating the linkages across these areas of development; and how we need to be reminded of the inter-connectedness of these issues. As reaffirmed by our leaders, and I quote, “Our Blue Pacific seeks to re-capture the collective potential of the region’s shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean based on an explicit

recognition of its shared “ocean identity”, “ocean geography”, and “ocean resources”. Through the Blue Pacific, Forum Leaders’ seek to reaffirm the connections of Pacific people with their natural resources, environment, culture and livelihoods” end quote.

Ladies and gentlemen, our Blue Pacific identity reaffirms that as a collective with a shared identity, geography and resources, we ought to be framing our policy, research and practice within that Pacific context, and this indeed is our challenge; because we have become accustomed to operating in our silos which not only defies our collective nature and identity as Pacific people but it also therefore threatens the sustainability of our natural resources and subsequently our existence.

Now the focus of my address this morning is on gender in the Pacific but I wanted to begin by sharing some of my reflections on the broader Pacific Update strategic conversations towards helping find solutions to our challenges as a region.

In our Pacific context, we know that our women are given the highest regard in our diverse cultural contexts; in matrilineal societies and in terms of their many achievements across various areas of development. Two years ago, SPC celebrated its 70th Anniversary as an organisation and as part of this celebration, we initiated a 70 Inspiring Women Campaign in recognition of how SPC has contributed to the advancement of gender equality and women’s empowerment across different sectors; and it was also in acknowledgement of the contribution that women themselves have made to development in all sectors across our 22 island member states. Now what we found from this campaign as you can imagine, is the number 70 was far too small and women in all their diversities are making some amazing and positive contributions towards sustainable development in the Pacific region and that is a known fact. The challenge is, these contributions by women are often invisible and so a lot more work is needed to tell these stories and communicate these achievements by women in the context of sustainable development in the Pacific.

Now related to this story on the 70 Inspiring Women Campaign is the fact that in the last two decades, the Pacific has seen some positive gains in regards to progressing gender equality; whereby a lot more people are now openly talking about gender issues, some of which were traditionally and historically taboo in our societies; there is now more action in terms of policies and programmes focused on addressing gender issues; the development of domestic

violence legislations is a big gain for us in the last decade; and lastly, women are breaking the glass ceiling through accessing leadership roles across sectors and including those sectors that were traditionally considered as dominated by men.

Now despite these developments, we all know that certain challenges remain. Gender based violence continues to be one of the biggest development challenge in our region with prevalence rates of more than 60% in Melanesia and more than 40% in Polynesia and Micronesia. As a region, how do we respond from a policy and research women have experienced violence of some form in their lifetime. As a region, how do we respond from a policy and research perspective to this gender issue? Is it still a research and policy consideration at this point or should our focus be dedicated to programmatic and service responses to elevate and enable solutions to the scourge of gender violence?

On education, we know that our girls are doing better than boys in schools; with increased access to primary and secondary education, but we also know that despite girls doing well over boys in education, these outcomes are not necessarily translated to access to decent work and better employment outcomes for women. As the audience engaged in this discussion, how do we create the balance across education and employment outcomes and what policy responses do we require, to create a better situation for our girls and our women? Recently the Pacific Skills Summit was convened here in Suva and I imagine some of the discussions at that Summit would have touched on how we match skills trainings and educational opportunities to labour market demands and industry needs; and so how do we leverage these different opportunities to address this gender gap from a policy perspective?

In terms of broader economic empowerment for women, the reality is, there is increased levels of poverty and hardship where it is estimated that 1 in 4 Pacific Islanders live below their national poverty lines; and as a result there is increasing inequalities, there is the unequal burden of care work; social protection is a challenge and employment rates for women are overall lower than men.

Relative to women's health, the NCD epidemic is taking a toll on our people and our women; and while we are seeing some improvements in access to skilled medical personnel (birth attendants); access to health facilities; planned pregnancies and access to modern methods of contraception; further social issues remain to be addressed. As a region we still have high

rates of teenage pregnancy; we need to do more in terms of support for survivors of sexual violence; Youth unemployment with a regional average of 23% compared to a global average of 12-13% is a major issue affecting young women in the Pacific, and we need to consider policy solutions in these areas of development.

On the issue of gender and climate change, gender is a critical determinant of climate change vulnerability. Along with other characteristics such as age, education and social status, gender determines a person's vulnerability to climate change, as well as their capacity to adapt; and because women and men have different experiences in terms of their power relations in society, roles and responsibilities, it also means that their vulnerability and their adaptive capacity to climate change is not the same as men; and women are subsequently, disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to think that this information is not new to you and that through your work in the policy, research or practice spaces, you would have come across this information and analysis already. The questions for us though are – Do we have all of the data and evidence we need to inform our policy and interventions? What other data and evidence do we need to build our case? Another question that we ought to ask ourselves is, are our policy responses effective, relevant and adequate to address the gender challenges our region faces; what can we do better? What could we do differently to obtain the results we want; and are there emerging opportunities to leverage our existing efforts and to elevate our policy responses?

Now in trying to find answers to these questions, we need to look within and search internally for some solutions. As Pacific people and as a region, we've continued to look outside for answers and while there is a lot of value in doing that, our lessons of date show that some of these solutions may not be sustainable for you and I and therefore we need to continue to look within for solutions. By looking within for solutions, we mean examining our own value and belief systems which are the basic foundations for our behaviours and actions as societies. This is about understanding where these values and practices come from, recognising that often our practices which have become part of our cultures, were developed at a certain time; in a certain period in response to a particular situation at such a time; and that 20—40 years later, these practices which have now become part of our cultures, are no longer relevant and are no longer effective today.

In closing ladies and gentlemen, as we acknowledge the status of gender in the region today, we recognise that the changes that we need has to be transformational in terms of transforming the power dynamics and structures that serve to reinforce gendered inequalities. Our gender-transformative approaches go beyond the “symptoms” of gender inequality to address “the underlying social norms, attitudes, behaviours, and social systems”. This approach entails engagement that critically examines, challenging and questioning gender norms and power relations that underlie visible gender gaps. From a programming perspective, this approach is relatively new in PICTs, pushing us out of our comfort zones and making us ask – and answer – difficult questions. Is what we are doing actually changing what needs to be changed? And if not? What else do we need to do, as individuals, as a collective and as Pacific member states in determining a sustainable future for our girls, for our women and for all of us as a Pacific community?

I thank you all for your kind attention, vinaka vakalevu, soifua ma ia manuia!