



Honourable Minister Mereseini Vuniwaqa

Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation

**Fiji National Statement at the 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women
(CSW65)**

Madam Chair and distinguished delegates,

Greetings, Bula Vinaka.

I would like to begin with offering heartfelt condolences and sympathy on the loss of lives caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in your countries and across the world.

Madam Chair, it is an honour to address the Commission on Status of Women as we gather to discuss women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

I am pleased to reaffirm Fiji's strong commitment to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Paris Agreement on climate change, UN Security Council resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions relating to women, peace and security, and our support for the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030.

We recognize that decision-making is the ability to make or influence decisions that affect one's life, in one's personal sphere and in the public sphere. We acknowledge that decision-making starts with how decisions are negotiated within a household and immediate

community, and how this is influenced by existing and evolving social and cultural norms and other circumstances that could create or constrain opportunities for women's and girls' voice and agency.

Madam Chair, in the past 25 years, Fiji has doubled the proportion of women Members of Parliament and has achieved and surpassed its SDG target for women's representation in Parliament. Fiji met this target in 2018, with the election of 10 women who accounted for 20% of MPs. Moreover, all five women MPs representing the party that formed the Government, hold Cabinet positions; three are Ministers and two are Assistant Ministers. In 2020, Fiji surpassed its SDG target when a woman opposition MP replaced a resigning member, bringing the total to 11 women MPs in the Fijian parliament.

Fijian women constitute 29% leadership positions in the Civil Service including 24% of Permanent Secretary Posts. 20% of judges and magistrates are women, an increase of more than one-quarter from 16% in 2016. I shall elaborate that in 2016, as part of civil service reforms, the Government adopted Open Merit Recruitment and Selection (OMRS) guidelines - without discrimination against or preference for any group or individual. The impact may already be reflected in some of the increases of women in decision-making positions and should, over coming years, further the opportunities for promotion of women in the civil service.

Madam chair, Fiji also has a robust tradition of women's rights and civil society organizations— mostly led by women- that, individually and through coalitions, have been foundational in accelerating gender equality for all women and girls.

In markets across Fiji, 80% of the vendors are women. Market Vendor Associations have been established at 12 municipal markets. At the end of 2020, women, on average, accounted for 88% of the 2,614 members of the associations and, seven of 12 Presidents and two-thirds (66%) of the members of the Executive Committees.

I would like to highlight too that digital access is widespread in Fiji and is increasingly having an impact on how women and girls influence decision-making.

Madam chair, whilst progress is notable with a strong foundation for achieving our Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), significant challenges still remain to achieve gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls in Fiji.

Fijian women and girls are still disproportionately responsible for unpaid care and domestic work and heavily involved in informal economic activities. The prevalence of violence against women and girls is significantly high- with almost 2 out of 3 (64%) women who have been subjected to physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. Sexual harassment that occurs in the workplace affects 1 in 5 women. We also need to do much better when it comes to access to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) information and services to all Fijian women and girls.

These challenges are further intensified by the effect of climate crisis and regular incidents of natural disasters that have a very real impact on our Island nation, particularly Fijian women and girls.

Madam chair, Looking ahead with a long-term vision to accelerate realization of gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls, the Fijian Government's efforts and investments (2021-2026) will be focused on three (3) strategic priority areas; ending gender based violence against all women and girls, promoting women's economic empowerment and improving protection, preparedness & resilience to disaster for all women and girls.

This will be realized through application of a 'whole government', 'whole of population', transformative and evidence based approaches and initiatives with emphasize on leadership and decision making for all women and girls, challenging discriminatory social norms as well as a comprehensive gender transformative institutional capacity development and improvement on availability and access to quality sex-disaggregated data

and gender statistics. Some key actions by the government include the development of the Fiji Country Gender Assessment (2021) and roll-out of the Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development (ICD) across all government institutions with specific focus on gender responsive budgeting. We are more committed and determined than ever to make progress with concrete actions.

Madam chair, the Fijian Government also recognizes its obligation to prevent violence against all women and girls. I am pleased to share that the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation (MWCOPA) is leading the development of a 'whole of government', 'whole of population' and evidence-based National Action Plan to prevent violence against all Women and Girls (NAP). Fiji is the first Pacific Island Country to start developing a National Action Plan to prevent violence against all women and girls and is one of the only two countries globally along with Australia. This is historic for our humble Pacific Island nation. Nationwide consultations and dialogues with Fijian women, men, girls and boys, stakeholders from key settings/sectors and communities have already started to inform the development of the National Action Plan. We are hopeful that together we can put measures in place to stop violence before it starts.

In conclusion, I would like to underline that without leadership and participation of all women and girls, we will never achieve the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development or defeat climate crisis. I shall also emphasize that no single fix solution or plan will erase the entrenched and often unconscious systems of gender bias in our societies; there must be many fixes, tailored to the specific conditions that prevail in each country and each region. As for Fiji, this involves addressing attitudes and social norms that structure the power relations between women and men and are embedded in gender inequality, gender discrimination and patriarchy and are the drivers and root causes of violence against women and girls.

None of us can move forward if half of us are held back. The Fijian Government is firmly committed to keep pushing for progress so we can all reach our full potential. Fijian boys and girls and our grandchildren deserve nothing less.
