

KEYNOT SPEAKER ADDRESS: Joelene Brown Mataele (Tonga)

Greetings, Malo e lelei. Ni sa bula vinaka, Talofa

First of all, I would like to pay my respect to the people of the land. Past and present, Aid Finau. Your Excellency's. Hon Minister Hon. Mereseini Vuniwaqa.. all women in all diversities.

Congratulations on getting here to the 2nd Pacific Feminist Forum 2019! That is worth a round of applause and also shows how committed we are as a movement in leaving our families, loved ones, friends and communities to be here in solidarity with each other to celebrate the work we have achieved but to also strategise and think about things that need greater attention, thought, voice or visibility to see the progress, wins and gains achieved for women in all its diversities in our region, thank you for being here.

Since the ending of my position as Chairperson for the Pacific Sexual Gender Diversity Network (PSGDN), knowing I've left it in the good hands of a new chair and also a new board to continue seeing the work into the future, and also being a part of the working committee to out see this forum, one has to reflect about my practice and where to from here?

Reflective practice has been critical for me of recent, for not only am I someone born of a certain decade, my personal challenge is always to ensure firstly I am not causing harm to others without compromising my ethics of practice, but to ensure I am attuned to current & relevant, regional, global issues, conversations, new ways of communication, new ideas, inter-generational realities and perspectives, but also holding firm to teachings handed down to me by my ancestors and also upholding my cultural & religious values and beliefs as an integral part of me, but also understanding how sometimes the things I believe in can be harmful to others beyond my control - example because I am Catholic, my relationship with my faith is for me, but for others it can be something that triggers something negative for them, I understand this, and I'm definitely not here to preach to anyone, but to make whoever understand how it relates to me in my reality.

I do understand how relationships are of importance to us all, because we can agree to disagree or debate many things, however we do need to reflect about how we treat one another.

Sit for a minute and think about what we can do better for one another.....?

We need to do better to uplift all diversities of women in our beloved Oceania region, I reflect in practice because I believe in solidarity and I believe we are stronger as a movement when we back each other up and when we uplift one another collectively.

The “Pacific Feminists Charter for Change” is a very clear and concise document that outlines how we define ourselves as Pacific feminists, our principles as feminists and as a collective, it is intentional and clear, it was also endorsed by participants of the inaugural Pacific feminists forum in 2016.

So since reading over the charter again recently, I reflect and understand this was a document written two years ago, and I asked myself - because remembering that reflective practice is important, that we constantly have to reflect on our movement and update documents as such to ensure we are aligned to the time, environment and contexts, it is a challenge always to maintain relevance, but equally a challenge to remain committed to honouring our feminist practice but also those we serve, after all this document informs our future work, it is the founding document for us all to reflect on and stay aligned too so we aren't compromising the movement but that we are honouring and valuing each other.

Which brings me to the point I wanted to highlight as part of my keynote today. We've seen globally the rise of some very radical and exclusionary movements rising against trans women in particular, using some very violent approaches to further alienating and excluding trans women from being recognised as women.

I've already heard murmurs of similar echoes among spaces across our region and I want to draw attention to it, for I feel it is not upholding the principles of this movement as Pacific feminists, but it is also not upholding our principles collectively and it would be remiss of me if I did not raise this today.

- * We already know across the Oceania region poverty for trans communities is at the lowest in all countries across the Pacific.

- * We already know that trans hate crimes exist and we are already seeing in Fiji trans murders

- * We know that trans healthcare is non-existent in the Pacific

- * We know legal gender recognition is not a reality for trans peoples across the Pacific.

- * We know that employment rates for trans peoples are the lowest compared to the general population in every country across the Pacific

- * We know that there are no trans support services funded by any one government in this region

- * And we know that there still exist punitive & criminal laws for trans peoples in some countries in the Pacific.

We know many things are practically “non-existent” for many trans peoples across this region, we know this! These aren't things trans people made up to invisibilise lesbians, we know this because the research tells us so.

I pose another question!

Are we really ok that trans women are being vilified and represented as men?

At a global conference recently, it was brought to the attention of the women's caucus by supposed Pacific lesbian activists - that "Fa'afafine are culturally recognised as men, and therefore they are men" and another statement "Trans women are intimidating to other women in women's spaces"

I read an article about UK radical and exclusionary feminists, who stated that one approach they were taking to change the public perception of trans women, was that they were telling gang members that trans women were men pretending to be women, so that trans women could access women's bathrooms to sexually violate young girls! Therefore if they came across trans women, beat the crap out of them because they are paedophiles!

Is this really where we are heading as a feminist movement? To mirror what radical and exclusionary feminists in the UK are willing to resort to, to inflict harm onto another woman?

So as I keep reflecting, I think about relationships, the importance and value of "relationships" and I ask myself the question? Are we as a movement truly aligned to our charter?

Do we need to be holding one another more accountable and discussing "NOT" the trans women discussion - but holding ourselves accountable to how we treat one another?

It alarms me some women have already arrived at this way of thinking! I remind us all here today, this is not us! That is not how we treat one another in the Pacific! Our principles are not to cause harm to any woman! Nor is it to dissect any intersectionality of a woman's identity or lessen it or compare it to another's reality for gain or profit - in any way shape or form!

Over and above all and fundamentally relationships are upheld always with the highest of regard, these are not new concepts, these are concepts exemplified to us by our ancestors, we value the importance of how we mirror relationships, but also how to maintain them.

The message I am receiving strong and clear is a message to many of us trans women, that places are becoming less and less safe for us and that there are "Feminists" who are very unhappy we exist in feminist spaces.

I will leave you with this!

There is no LGBTQI movement without Feminism, there is no Feminism without Trans Rights!

We cannot talk about Solidarity, Resistance nor Revolution in our movement if these injustices and uncomfortable Talanoa are not welcomed into these spaces!

We all have a vital part to play and it is essential that we pay full attention in understanding the realities of marginalised women of all diversities and that we do better in honouring our forum theme this year!

Historically & never before have we seen the rise in attacks & murders of Women Human Rights Defenders, it is appalling and it is scary! And It is a reality that is being replicated towards women like myself in our own movement by other women, we cannot practice this way moving forward otherwise we are practicing the very patriarchy that we fight in our daily lives and as a movement!

Here in the Pacific we must keep the spotlight on the protection of ALL our Defenders.

We definitely Matter! But we definitely have to do better!

Thank you.