



# Official Welcome Address

**Minister for Women, Children and Poverty  
Alleviation**

**Honorable Mereseini Vuniwaqa**

**2nd Pacific Feminist Forum**

**"Sustaining Solidarity, Resistance and Revolution"**

**Monday, 20<sup>th</sup> May, 2019**

## **Salutation:**

Feminists from around the Pacific

The organisers and representatives of the partner agencies

Invited guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Ni sa Bula Vinaka

I stand on the sacrifices

Of a million women before me

Thinking

What can I do to make this mountain taller

So the women after me can see farther...

These are the words of Indian-Canadian poet Rupi Kaur. It is a indeed a pleasure for me to join you all this morning as you prepare for a week of solidarity, inspiring exchanges, hard questions and discussions, commitments and much more in recognition of the mountain that you are, in the context of what Rupi Kaur talks about. To say it is a pleasure to be here with all of you today would be an understatement. This is truly an important opportunity, it is an uplifting and inspiring opportunity. This Forum is truly a celebration, a celebration of the contributions that the women Pacific Islanders make in every aspect of life: in the home, on the job, in the community, as feminists, mothers, sisters, daughters, farmers, market vendors, students, workers, citizens, and leaders.

This exciting second regional meeting of Pacific feminists is being convened by a regional working group, with additional leadership by partners of the We Rise Coalition - FWRM, femLINKpacific, DIVA for Equality, and International Women's Development Agency. On the outset I wish to thank FWRM for inviting me and I congratulate all the agencies involved in making this forum a possible.

## **Introduction:**

Feminism within the Pacific has grown from strength to strength, with various feminist organisations, networks, activists and groups accumulating a wealth of experience and knowledge to advance gender equality and women's rights across the region. The Pacific has a unique set of complexities when it comes to advancing the cause of gender equality. It is a region of diverse cultures, identities and contextual realities, particularly for women and across the region, patriarchal social norms and discrimination continue to hinder opportunities for women in public and private life, and strip them of their basic human rights.

## **Background of the Pacific Feminist Forum:**

Against this backdrop, the inaugural Pacific Feminist Forum (PFF) was a ground-breaking event during the 16 Days of Activism in November 2016. One hundred and thirty (130) participants from thirteen (13) Pacific countries and territories including Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Fiji, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Kiribati, New Caledonia, Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Tonga, Australia and New Zealand came together for this pioneering moment in the 'herstory' of the Pacific feminist movement.

## **Pacific Feminists Charter for Change:**

A key outcome of the PFF was the Pacific Feminists Charter for Change endorsed by all participants and now has 144 individual and organisational endorsements from across the Pacific. The Charter sets a framework for feminist organisations and policy work on key gender equality challenges in

the Pacific. The process of developing such outcomes statements facilitates negotiation and collaboration within the Pacific feminist movement, while the document itself provides a foundation for shared advocacy and consistent messages on priority women's issues and allows for circulation of strong political language to influence multilaterally negotiated documents.

I am told that since 2016, the Pacific Feminist Charter has been utilized by feminists to guide advocacy in national, regional and global spaces and successfully influenced those spaces through advocacy and lobbying, networking, strategising and developing strong alliances with fellow activists worldwide.

Having said that, it is important that Pacific Feminists have continuous engagement within a collective space to collectively map points of commonality on identified issues, and present strong, collective pacific feminist positions within regional and global level dialogues and decision-making forums.

### **About the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pacific Feminist Forum:**

I understood that the 2<sup>nd</sup> PFF has brought together approximately 150 diverse women from across the Pacific to achieve the aim of the Forum to reflect on key issues paramount to gender equality and women's rights, and facilitate opportunities for collaboration to effect positive change for all women and girls within our respective regional communities. It will also be a time of celebrating the tremendous gains that previous generations of

Pacific Feminists have made (and are still making), so that the new wave of feminist activism is able to flourish.

### **Feminist solidarity to create social change in the region:**

The challenge for Pacific feminists is the geographical divide and socio economic realities of our 22 developing island states. Pacific feminism faces a unique hardship of continuous engagement and solidified efforts as access to resources are scarce, with islands so distant, making physical solidarity difficult, but also an isolation of feminist works separated by the world's largest ocean. Therefore, the Pacific feminist movement is one going against the current, as advocates and activists forge through the vast Pacific territory to consolidate works and push a Pacific development agenda to the forefront of global progress plans.

Within the context of rising individualism and the seemingly unstoppable spread of neo-liberal economic ideas across the globe, the power of continuing collective efforts by women around the world to bring about change in their lives and societies is remarkable. The Pacific's feminist collective action will surely show the same impact and I encourage each one you to stay strong in sisterhood and stay united in comradery because the battle you are fighting is extremely important but it also a difficult one.

To me, feminist solidarity starts with the decision to hear the other. It is a decision to listen to the experience of the other, to try to hear the interpretation and the values of the others. It means that we have made a decision to understand each other in the context of patriarchal system of hierarchies, to map her, me and us in the context of social discriminations,

injustices and privileges. It means we chose compassion, to have consciousness about ourselves and the other at the same time. We choose understanding and not accusation, we choose empathy and not hate. We are linked. We are not ranked. It entails accepting that our struggles and stories are interconnected. We stand together with each other. We sit in circles and share. We move out of our homes and work places into the streets together. We see one another. We hold hands. We see each other's smiles and fierceness. Together we energize, strategize and soothe each other. It is why solidarity is so much fun. We move beyond recognition of problems to working together, to have the common efforts to build that common ground we hope to see.

Sometimes the road to progress can feel like it's two steps forward and one step back, particularly when it comes to advancing the rights, opportunities, and full participation of women and girls. It can seem discouraging, whether you've been on that road for a long time or are just starting out. But think how different the world would be if the people who came before us had just gotten discouraged, and because of that, had given up. Thank you to you all and let's continue in our pledge and strive to further boost the power of feminist solidarity and social change.

### **Conclusion:**

Ladies and gentlemen and colleagues, in conclusion the region and the world would be a better place if women and men enjoyed the same rights, and had the same representation and resources. Because let's not forget the overwhelming evidence that gender equality is not only fair, but also of

benefit to society. It has a positive impact on economic growth, health, education and peace. I am confident that history belongs to those who work to make the world a better place and I am confident that gender equality is one of the defining issues by which future generations will judge our performance as leaders, activists and citizens. We have to look for ways to connect better, mentor and support. And we have to understand that despite setbacks and stumbles on our long march to full equality, everywhere we look, there are too signs of hope.

Cheers Again to You all and the feminist solidarity is the way forward!

With these words, it's my pleasure to officially open the 2nd Pacific Feminist Forum. I wish you the very best.

Thank you. Vinaka vakalevu