
16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER VIOLENCE - Message from SPC

Director-General

Thursday, 11 December 2008

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Violence against women is a serious issue which affects all countries of the world, including our Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs). Domestic violence in particular is a widespread and largely unaddressed problem in our region, and one which we must all act collectively to understand and eradicate.

The Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) is proud to observe the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence, which runs from 25 November, International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, to 10 December, International Human Rights Day, symbolically linking violence against women and human rights to emphasise that violence against women is a violation of human rights.

I acknowledge SPC's own staff and everyone else in our region working tirelessly to eliminate gender violence and to provide support to survivors of such violence.

We know that women are disproportionately affected by violence in the home. Globally, one in three women will experience violence by an intimate partner during her lifetime. The types of violence women experience in our own backyard range from intimidation and threats to beatings, rape, forced prostitution and even murder by family members including husbands, partners, brothers and fathers. Any such violence is a grave violation of human rights and has a devastating impact on Pacific Island women, families, communities and societies.

Domestic violence is perhaps the most insidious form of violence, remaining hidden and unaddressed since it occurs inside private homes, is rarely discussed and is often considered culturally 'acceptable'. Often, cases of domestic violence are not reported to the police, and even when they are, investigations and prosecutions of these crimes are given low priority. In many cases, domestic violence legislation does not exist, nor do crisis centres where survivors of domestic violence can seek help.

Several countries in our region are stepping up their efforts to protect women through comprehensive legislation, improved law enforcement, better services for victims, stronger partnerships with civil society and increased efforts to engage men and boys in addressing the problem.

I take this opportunity to personally applaud these efforts.

However, we must continue to do more. Laws must be enacted and enforced, and impunity must end. We must combat attitudes and behaviour that condone or excuse violence committed against women in our communities. We must channel significantly increased human and financial resources toward law and policy reform, social services for victims and survivors, and public education.

SPC is committed to doing its part toward the elimination of violence against women and to helping our member PICTs create strong nations based on respect for human rights.

The challenge is firstly to get to the root of the problem. We must understand why, where and to what extent domestic violence occurs. As such, SPC's Human Development Programme (HDP), in collaboration with the World Health Organization, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and national governments, has been working to survey the situation of violence against women and children in the Pacific. One such study was finalised in 2001 in Samoa, and two additional studies have just been completed, in Kiribati and Solomon Islands. Full reports on those two surveys are expected to be released in early 2009. It is thanks to the high level of dedication, commitment and cooperation of the governments of our member PICTs that we have been able to conduct these studies, which will lead not only to a better understanding of the situation of domestic violence but also to targeted interventions to eradicate it.

Another challenge is to assist PICTs to deliver on legal and policy responses and on educating people. Through our Regional Rights Resources Team (RRRT), SPC is working actively and in collaboration with other development partners to help national governments review and strengthen laws relating to violence against women and build the capacity of government officials and civil society to better understand and address the issue.

SPC will continue and accelerate these efforts over the coming years to help all PICTs in their efforts to eradicate violence against women.

We are failing our sisters, mothers and daughters—indeed our nations and all of humanity—if we do not act with urgency to address and eliminate violence against women.

During this year's 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence, I encourage all Pacific Islanders, both governments and citizens alike, to take a moment to think about the existence and impacts of violence against women in your country or territory, to openly discuss the issue, and most importantly to take action to eliminate it.

We can all play a part.