



Statement by the Director for Women of the Government of the Republic of Fiji
53rd SESSION OF THE COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN
NEW YORK, 2nd – 13th MARCH, 2009.

THEME: 'The Equal Sharing of Responsibilities between Men and Women, Including Care Giving in the Context of HIV/AIDS'

Mr. Chairman

I thank you for giving me this opportunity to address this meeting.

As we meet in this 53rd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women to deliberate on a very important theme, we are also reminded of the different challenges and global crises that we all face today, challenges and crises that have not only affected our economies but more importantly our livelihood and even the very fabric of our societies. The Convention (CEDAW) is clear and so are our responsibilities as member States to fulfill our obligations contained therein. However, it is important to emphasize that the challenges each of our societies face in fulfilling these obligations at the grassroots level, differ significantly.

I am here today representing a small island developing nation, a vibrant and pluralistic society that is full of diverse cultural and traditional values. These are values that have existed for centuries, values that have been passed on to us by our forefathers and which we have adhered to and depended upon. Not only have these traditions and cultures been a part of our lives, it is something sacred, that we identify ourselves with and defines us. In a traditional setting, these are the same values that dictate the ownership of customary land, the division of labour in the family or community and more importantly governs our behavior and our shared way of life. The roles of men and women are thus defined by these traditional structures that we embrace which in some or most cases are complementary in nature although they may not necessarily uphold the principle of equal sharing of responsibilities that is seen as ideal in its strictest interpretation.

In Fiji, the role of women is still closely associated with the care of the family and supports the economic activity of men. Women are the care givers. It is the women who are involved with the direct care of persons, which include children, the frail elderly and people with various disabilities and illnesses. This role is also reflected in the type of work women do in the formal sector. Despite the fact that we note the increase in the number of educated women, women are normally employed in care giving and social welfare services and outnumber men in teaching posts, nursing and support services. Interestingly, as a result of the implementation of our Government policies, we have witnessed that there is a gradual realisation of the need for equal sharing of responsibilities in certain sectors of the country, but needless to say, these traditional roles still persist at all levels of our societies.

Mr. Chairman, bearing this in mind, in recent years, the growing number of HIV/AIDS cases in our country has also presented another aspect on the issue of care giving. To a great extent, in societies like ours, sexuality and reproductive health are not topics that are commonly discussed openly and frankly around the family table. Even though Fiji is categorised as a low prevalence, we are aware of the devastating impacts of the epidemic not only in relation to its spread but more importantly its negative impacts on our families which fundamentally is the heart of our society. Understandably, there is the sense of fear that still exists when it comes to care giving in the context of HIV/AIDS, even among family members. Ultimately it is the mothers, wives and women who often feel obligated and usually take on the care giving responsibilities. For some, even paid work are foregone and other responsibilities set aside because providing care for persons living with HIV is so demanding.

Even though our laws and government policies guarantee non-discrimination on the basis of gender, like in most developing countries, equal sharing of responsibilities presents special challenges for us that need careful consideration. To instil new western or international values onto people who do not know any other except theirs is something that we are cautious about. There is a tendency for us to dismiss, demean or look down on traditional values and the social structure in which these values are incorporated. We recognize the need to empower women and eliminate any form of discrimination, and also the need to modify some inherited values in order to meet the changing social conditions and realities of life that we now face. At the same time, we ought to realize that there is no such thing as absolute freedom and equally important, freedom also means responsibility on the part of the individual in the exercise of his/her freedom. These are the challenges that we face which we hope will be reflected in the outcomes of this meeting.

Mr. Chairman, our power lies in education. To inculcate in people the principle of equal sharing of responsibilities is to educate them of its importance. It is only through the education of our people, especially our children, will they be enabled to make crucial decisions regarding the values that we need in our society. We depend on parents as the primary nurturers and educators of their children, and the family as the fortress from which children depart as well-grounded and responsible adults. We depend on our formal education system to provide for our society knowledgeable, informed, and skilled individuals, fully equipped to live dignified lives, and more importantly, to contribute meaningfully to the advancement of societal ideals and principles we aspire to. We depend on our Women Plan of Action (WPA) and other robust government policies to continue to empower our people, men and women alike. We depend on the civil society, UN agencies and donor partners to fulfil our international obligations. And we depend on the Commission on the Status of Women and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to help illuminate the path and guide us as we move forward in appropriately addressing the theme that we are all here to deliberate on.

Mr. Chairman, having said that, the Government of Fiji remains committed and will continue to implement the Beijing Platform for Action and we look forward to the continuous support and cooperation of the relevant UN agencies, our regional bodies, development partners and all women organizations in Fiji.

Thank You.