



**STATEMENT BY THE HONORABLE MINISTER FOR SOCIAL WELFARE, WOMEN AND
POVERTY ALLEVIATION OF THE FIJIAN GOVERNMENT – DR. JIKO LUVENI**

**56TH SESSION OF THE COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN, NEW YORK (27TH
FEBRUARY – 9TH MARCH, 2012)**

Madam Chair,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Allow me to begin by bringing you warm greetings from the Fijian government and its people. Fiji's population of 837,000 people is centred in rural and peri-urban areas, and the theme of this year's CSW could not be more suitable in the Fijian context, where the contribution of rural women to sustainable socio-economic national development is vital.

Madam Chairman, in the context of implementing the Beijing Platform for Action and meeting the MDGs, I would like to align Fiji's statement with that of the G77 and China, which resonates with the challenges, obstacles and needs of rural women in Fiji.

Madam Chairman

The Fijian Government prioritizes policies that promote Gender Equality in the Decision Making Process, through the empowerment of women. In this regard, allow me to outline key initiatives in the national context:

1. We continue to support women taking up leadership positions in the traditional hierarchy. Of the three high chiefs of the three confederacies in Fiji, one is a lady and there are 225 women chiefs of traditional clans compared to 1,576 men. The positive is that women are not denied their traditional inheritance. With respect to the women chiefs, community-based leadership and empowerment training is necessary to continue to bolster their leadership positions. About 300 women are members of hospital boards and village committees. Given the strong ties of kinship in our communities, such leadership roles are stepping stones to higher public office.
2. In line with the existing Domestic Violence Decree, and our national commitment to Zero Tolerance of Violence against Women, 15 local communities have in 2011 declared zero

tolerance in their communities, and the aim is to increase this number by 15 communities annually. Such commitments by rural and urban communities is supported at the national level by legislative frameworks such as Fiji's Family Law Act and the Crimes Decree, and the provision of social services in the areas of education and health that prioritise the needs of women and children.

3. Rural women's access to Productive Resources, Markets and Financial Institutions has been a recent area of focus. The ability of rural women to engage in income-generating activities has in the past been curtailed by no or limited access to finances. The Micro-Finance Unit and the National Centre for Small and Micro Enterprise Development has identified rural women as a group with potential to create sustainable economic development projects, and now counts women as their majority clientele – 78% in the case of the Micro-Finance Unit and 60% for the NCSMED.
4. The Government's Roadmap for Democracy and Sustainable Socio-Economic Development has prioritized, for the period of 2009-2012, the improvement of Infrastructure and Service Delivery. With the assistance of bilateral development partners, 1900 sewing machines have been distributed to a myriad of women's communities to enable women to engage in economic activity. Roads are being built to rural villages and settlements that have too long lived without access to safe water, electricity and access to markets.

With access to markets far from home, rural women who make up 87% of market vendors in Fiji's urban areas will need support services such as accommodation during their time in the cities and towns selling their produce. This is a project that government has partnered with UN Women to deliver, and contributes to alleviating poverty, given that a report by UN Women highlights that 70% of market vendors' incomes are used to support basic family needs. In this context, Madam Chair, I wish to acknowledge the work that has been done by UN Women in its first year, and look forward to working with UN Women in the areas of economic and political empowerment of women as it consolidates and prioritises its work into the future.

Madam Chair

These are a few of the initiatives that have been taken nationally to empower rural women, with the support of some international partners. I cannot emphasise enough that the ability of small countries like my own to meet the targets that we have together created for ourselves through the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals, and the outcomes of the 23rd Special Session of the General Assembly is dependant on concerted action and partnerships with the wider international community.

The obstacles and challenges in eradicating poverty, and providing an empowering environment where women can operate in their chosen field without fear of stigmatization, discrimination, or violence, are many. These challenges are not deterring us from action, and Fiji remains committed to both international and national goals in this respect.

I thank you Madam Chair.