



Theme: Gender-based Violence in the Pacific and the launch of Amnesty International's Report on informal settlements in Solomon Islands

Speech by Amnesty International CEO Patrick Holmes at a Gender Human Rights presentation at AUT University, Auckland, on 6 September 2011

Good morning ladies and gentlemen and thank you for coming. I take great pleasure in welcoming you, in partnership with the Pacific Media Centre, to this press conference. I would like to firstly acknowledge David Robie and the Pacific Media Centre, not only for their support of this event, but also for the work that he, and individuals he has fostered, have done to raise awareness about the important human rights issues the Pacific faces.

One of the very issues they cover is the endemic problem of sexual and gender based violence in the Pacific. Through the launch of its new Report "*Where is the dignity in that?*" Amnesty International is taking the opportunity to highlight the impact that informal settlements in the Solomon Islands have in exacerbating sexual and gender based violence.

And let me be very clear, the issue of violence against women in the Pacific is a human rights issue of epic proportions and the need to address it is urgent. As leaders meet for the Pacific Island Forum Leaders' Meeting in Auckland this week, daughters, sisters, mothers and wives continue to be beaten, raped and killed. Many of the accounts that Amnesty International has received are truly horrific and yet so often the issue does not make headlines. This violence is not only a reality; it is our reality and it is one we all have a responsibility to address.

Gender discrimination in the region is systemic and permeates through all levels of society. Violence against women is the ultimate physical manifestation of this entrenched discrimination and the human rights violations that occur are perpetuated by inadequate and outdated legislation throughout the region. Some Pacific Island Constitutions even fail to prohibit discrimination based on "sex" or "gender" and in those countries whose constitutions do prohibit discrimination, it is not enforced. In many Pacific nations marital rape is not a crime. Simply put, it is not illegal for men to rape their wives. In Papua New Guinea cultural practices such as bride prices, polygamy and sorcery all serve to deepen the discrimination and violence felt by women. If you are considered a piece of property, it is very difficult to instil the understanding that you have rights, that you are part of the fabric of humanity. But this understanding is not impossible to achieve. While the issue is complex and at times seems overwhelming, effective legal protection for women can be achieved.

The reality is that violence against women in the region is rife with some nations having the worst rates out of any country on earth. On average two out of every three Pacific women have suffered abuse. In Kiribati 68% of women have been abused and violence against women in the Marshall Islands has been reported to be at almost 90%. With figures such as these, it is sadly unsurprising that sexual and gender based violence is considered standard

practice by many in the region. Amnesty International has statistics from a recent survey in Samoa showing that 85% of women who had been abused never asked any formal agency for help. Of these, the same percentage failed to do so because they thought such abuse was the “norm”, or “not serious enough”.

The issue is exacerbated by the fact that many women often have little knowledge of their human rights or the role that the justice system can have in upholding those rights. Women instead, have no choice but to follow traditional reconciliation avenues, which, instead of providing redress for abused women, often perpetuate harmful societal norms that put the unity of the family above the women’s right to physical and mental integrity. Amnesty International has even received reports of women being forced to pay reparations to their husband in payment for having been raped by another man.

Even when women are aware of their rights, they are often hesitant to lay charges as they are economically dependent on the perpetrator – their husband. This economic dependence also leaves women with few opportunities to escape violence. And even when Pacific women do report violence, entrenched discriminatory attitudes within the police force and the justice system result in charges regularly being dropped or not pursued at all. Again, Amnesty International has received reports of women being raped by the very police officers who are mandated to protect them.

In addition, the absence of legal mechanisms to ensure protection of women means that these avenues simply don’t exist for women in the Pacific. For them, there is no safe place to go.

The region continues to feel the impact of the ineffective protection for women in every level of society. Violence denies women their most basic rights and freedoms and significantly curtails their ability to contribute and participate in society. Not only does it have devastating consequences for victims, it perpetuates a vicious circle that drives poor communities even further into poverty. And women who live in poverty are at even greater risk of being abused.

The systemic problem of sexual and gender based violence in the Pacific has been, for too long, the white elephant in the room, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the incredible work of Pacific women and non-governmental organisations who have fought to have this issue given the attention it deserves.

In recent years some small progress has been made. In Cairn’s in 2009 at the Pacific Island Forum Leaders’ Meeting, Pacific leaders recognised gender-based violence as a risk to human security and a potential destabilising factor for communities and societies alike. In a milestone decision for Pacific women, Pacific leaders pledged to take action to eradicate sexual and gender based violence. For the first time in 40 years, the widespread issue of violence against women in the region was taken seriously by Pacific leaders. In 2010 in Vanuatu Pacific leaders commended actions in the region to take forward the directions from Cairns and acknowledged the initiative of the Forum Regional Security Committee to establish a Reference Group on sexual and gender based violence to support the Forum Secretariat and national efforts to address the issue.

Since then, the Reference Group has met in Fiji and conducted country visits to Tonga and the Solomon Islands; meeting with a range of stake holders and interest groups.

The Reference Group and key non-governmental organisations in the region have been instrumental in aiding Pacific Island governments to prepare policies and draft legislation to address the issue.

But these promises, policies and draft bills, while significant for setting the foundations to address the issue, nevertheless, do nothing to protect Pacific women and their families from violence.

Amnesty International acknowledges the fundamental groundwork by key players in the Pacific, both at regional and national levels; but the organisation remains deeply concerned at the absence of concrete progress by Pacific governments to address the issue. Despite the repeated commitment to combat this issue since 2009, only Vanuatu has specific legislation on the books to address violence against women in the form of the Family Protection Act. Its enforcement however, is ineffective in providing women with real protection. Perpetrators are seldom brought to justice due to a lack of police training on domestic violence and the provisions of the new Family Protection Act.

It is imperative for a national legal framework to be put in place to solidify these new policies to combat sexual and gender-based violence if women and their families are to have real protection. This framework is essential for women to be able to realise their full potential in Pacific societies. Until national legislation is passed to prevent violence, punish offenders and provide compensation to victims, the progress to combat gender based violence remains an intangible aspiration.

In 2010 Amnesty International acknowledged that without this crucial next step, the momentum and hard earned progress that has been achieved thus far would falter and be lost. The reality is that as every time the clock ticks, more women and girls are beaten, raped and killed.

In a campaign to address this grave concern, in September 2010, Amnesty International launched a petition calling on Pacific Island leaders to take effective action to address the issue of sexual and gender based violence in the Pacific.

In Amnesty International's largest petition ever in New Zealand, well over 20,000 individuals have called on Pacific leaders to: make their country a safe and secure place for women and their families; to put in place laws to prevent violence, punish offenders, and compensate survivors; and to sign, ratify and put into practice international human rights conventions that protect women from violence.

This number of signatures is one fifth of the population of Tonga, two times the population of Nauru and over 10 times the population of Niue. The size of this petition shows the depth of concern of the public for Pacific women to have real protection from violence. We have every one of those 20,000 signatures here today as a physical reminder of the public's demand for change.

In an important step for Pacific women's rights we have received news that His Excellency, Anote Tong, President of Kiribati has agreed to accept this petition during his attendance

at the 2011 PIF Leaders' Meeting in recognition of the concern for the safety and security of Pacific women and the need for further action to ensure real protection of Pacific women. His decision is commended by Amnesty International and the support of Women's Rights and Advocacy in the Pacific in the collection of signatures and in helping secure this handover has been of incredible value to Amnesty International. This support is extremely appreciated and acknowledged by the organisation.

In order to cement the hard work that has been done to draft legislation and create policy and ensure concrete protections are in place to protect women and their families; Pacific leaders must change the lights on women's rights. They must move from their communiqué in Cairns to action in Auckland. They must put draft legislation into law and take effective action to eradicate violence against women in accordance with their promises and their international obligations. To effectively do so, Amnesty International calls on Pacific Island leaders to agree to a concrete timeframe to pass these draft bills into legislation and report on progress made.

This timeframe is essential if progress is to be measured in the region to address the issue. It is a harsh reality that rhetoric will not protect women. In order to profile the significance of this issue, Amnesty International is launching a new report entitled "Where is the dignity in that? – Women in Solomon Islands slums denied sanitation and safety" which focuses on the exacerbating effect informal settlements or slums have on the issues of gender-based violence in the Solomon Islands.

The report is part of Amnesty International's Demand Dignity campaign, and focuses on the human rights violations that occur against people in slums. The report's first hand accounts were gathered from interviews with over 80 residents from 11 slums during visits to the Solomon Islands in 2009 and 2010. Amnesty International also met with government officials, health care providers and women's organisations.

From the evidence gathered, two major concerns emerged that continue to plague the communities in these settlements: an almost total lack of clean water and proper sanitation; and the pervasive prevalence of violence against women.

The report illustrates how poverty and the resulting living conditions further discriminate against women and exacerbate the problem of sexual and gender based violence.

Historically the displacement of a large number of people due to ethnic violence and the search for work led to tremendous overcrowding in Solomon Island's capital Honiara. The informal settlements are bursting at the seams; with 20,000 of Honiara's 64,600 people living in slums. That is a third of the capital's entire population. This overwhelming number is putting pressure on the already insufficient infrastructure. Amnesty International found that 92 per cent of households in these settlements did not have a water supply in their homes. The water supply is unreliable and the frequent water shortage forces people to use water from contaminated streams or wells.

Some 55 percent of residents relieve themselves either in the sea, a river, or nearby bushes. 20 percent use pit toilets, which are toilets without a slab or other platform. These toilets are not only a 5 to 15 minute walk away and are shared with five or six other households, they also pose a number of risks. Amnesty International was told of many incidences where

people had injured themselves while losing their footing on the path to the toilets or, worse, falling into an open pit toilet.

The women are those who suffer the most under the devastating conditions reported in the slums of Honiara. They must provide their families with clean water every day. The lack of security in their journeys – often over 4 km's a day, and the lack of privacy when washing leaves them vulnerable as targets of harassment, sexual violence, and rape.

Both national and local government officials said that the solution to overcrowding and lack of basic infrastructure in slums was for residents to return to their villages.

While some measures have been attempted by the Council to improve conditions such as a draft building code and the introduction of a credit scheme in 2007 to allow people to borrow money to build, these initiatives have not had an affect.

The response from government officials to the issue has ranged from outright refusal to acknowledge the problem to toothless gestures. It is time for the government of the Solomon Islands to step up to its responsibilities.

Amnesty International calls for the immediate implementation of steps to improve the situation of women in the Solomon Islands. Urgent action is required to ensure at least the minimum essential levels of safe water for domestic use and sanitation in all slums, including by ensuring access to clean water within the vicinity of each household, providing assistance to residents to establish water storage tanks, build safe toilets and private washing areas, and by providing information on hygienic water storage and use of toilets.

Amnesty International also calls for consultation with women in informal settlements to identify key concerns of their safety and well-being.

Specific legislation to criminalize all forms of violence against women must be enacted as a matter of urgency. While the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands has been a successful initiative to educate communities and Solomon Island's Police on the importance of eradicating violence against women the issue remains deeply embedded. Amnesty International would like to acknowledge the important work the Solomon Islands Government has done to pass a National Action Plan to address violence against women but until concrete legislation is passed there remains no protection for women and their daughters.

To create lasting and effective protection for women, a comprehensive and long term approach is required. Changes to legislation must be complemented with mechanisms across the board to ensure that all organisations that are required to combat the issue are not only well resourced and supported but coordinated in their approach.

This requires funding, support and rights based education initiatives of both communities and institutions in parallel to the legal framework Amnesty International urges the Solomon Islands to implement without delay.

I am pleased to now introduce Ms Jocelyn Lai – a member of the Board of the Young Women's Christian Association in the Solomon Islands to speak about the real face of this

issue, the stories of the daughters, sisters, mothers and wives who are affected by this endemic human rights issue.

The Young Womens Christian Association of the Solomon Islands is a non-government, membership organization which is affiliated with the World YWCA movement. The YWCA of the Solomon Islands was established in 1975.

The YWCA works to assist Solomon Islands women to fully utilise their potential and live fulfilled lives. It serves as a training ground to transform women to be leaders of change through its programs, which address issues such as leadership, human rights and sexual and reproductive health rights.

The YWCA also operates a number of services to the public, including the YWCA Hostel in Honiara, which provides safe and affordable accommodation for 37 working women and the YWCA Kindergarten for pre-school aged children between 3 to 6 years old.

I would now like to invite Jocelyn Lai to talk about the hugely important work that the YWCA are doing to combat the issue in the Solomon Islands, the significant hurdles and challenges that remain, and finally the exciting opportunities that exist for achieving real progress on this issue. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Ms Jocelyn Lai.....

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