

## **Opening Address**

### **16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence Campaign**

**Commissioner, Royal Solomon Islands Police Force, Frank Prendergast**

**Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> November 2015**

- Honourable Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare,
- Honourable Ministers and Members of Parliament,
- Honourable Chief Justice
- Permanent Secretaries and Constitutional Post Holders.
- Acting RAMSI Special Coordinator,
- Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
- Members of United Nations agencies in the Solomon Islands,
- Members of Aid Organisations and NGO's
- Executive of the RSIPF and PPF and rank and file,
- Distinguished Guests
- Ladies and gentlemen.

Firstly I would like to thank the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs for inviting me to attend today. I am honoured to speak to you on the opening of the 2015, 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence Campaign.

It was really impressive to see such a large turn out today for the march; and it is good to see so many here for this opening ceremony. It is particularly encouraging to see leaders, men and women from all sectors including senior Government officials supporting the launch of this very important program.

We are fortunate indeed to have the Honourable Prime Minister here as the key note speaker, a fact that is indicative of how serious an issue Gender based violence actually is; thank you Sir for your leadership on this issue.

Gender-based violence is a problem that seriously impacts not only on the individual, but also on the community and nation as a whole. It not only injures and degrades the victim, and causes anguish for their family but it diminishes the community and the country as a whole. The victim's suffering is the countries' suffering. The perpetrators of this violence are not only attacking the victim, they are also undermining the wellbeing of the nation. Beginning today, 16 Days of Activism is occurring around the world in many different countries to bring attention to the issue of gender-based violence.

The 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence Campaign is a global campaign dedicated to ending gender-based violence. It runs each year from the 25<sup>th</sup> of November "International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women" until the 10<sup>th</sup> of December, "Human Rights Day".

The 16 Day Campaign is dedicated to:

- Raising awareness about gender-based violence as a human rights issue;
- Strengthening local work around violence against women;
- Providing a forum to develop and share strategies;
- Demonstrating the solidarity of activists around the world; and
- Calling on governments to account, respond, protect, and prevent violence against women.

Here in the Solomon Islands our 2015 national campaign has the theme of *"You, Me Stan Tugeda fo Endim Vaelens"*.

It aims to create awareness of the benefits of the Family Protection Act 2014, and is designed to advocate for the commencement of that Act. Our campaign is focused on Family Violence as unfortunately in the Solomon Islands it is very prevalent albeit not the only form of Gender based violence. Under the Act violence is defined as taking a number of forms: Physical violence, Sexual Abuse, Psychological Abuse, Economic Abuse.

The Family Protection Act 2014 is a milestone for the Solomon Islands. For the first time, our country has a law which specifically looks at addressing domestic violence. It addresses the gaps within current legislation and importantly, focuses on protecting the victims of violence. It is an Act which specifically deals with the dynamics of violence within the home which is different in context from violence along the street or in a night club.

The Act is designed to ensure the safety, health and well-being of survivors of domestic violence, and their family members. It protects everybody – women, men and children --- in domestic relationships. The Act is a recognition of the prevalence, and a response to the seriousness of Family Violence in the Solomon Islands.

Data from The Solomon Islands Family Health Safety Study indicates that that nearly 2 in 3 (64%) women aged 15-49, experience physical or sexual violence, or both, by an intimate partner.

To date this year the RSIPF is on track to record 1000 cases of Family violence in 2015 alone. This figure is all the more staggering when one realises that figure comprises data mainly from Honiara and its surrounds, and we know that there is endemic under reporting of this issue.

The Family Support Centre has received more than 300 cases of domestic violence since January, 2015.

Every morning when I go through the Daily Dispatch Reports of incidents that have occurred overnight – many of those incidents are reports of Family Violence, often involving alcohol. A significant number of these Family Violence incidents have resulted in serious injury and some in death.

Overwhelmingly the victims of these incidents are female and the perpetrators are male. From the start of January to the end of October 2015 the RSIPF have recorded 798 cases of Family Violence. In 796 of those cases the perpetrator was male.

These statistics are stark enough but consider these additional factors which make Family Violence even more pernicious. The first is that there is no safe place for the victim to retreat too. Our homes should be a sanctuary. They should provide comfort, security and protection not to mention love. For the victims of Family Violence they do none of those things. The second factor is that family violence creates a vicious cycle. Children exposed to in the home often repeat that pattern of behaviour as they grow older, and have relationships and families of their own.

This evil must stop. This campaign and the Family Protection Act are designed to help break this cycle, and protect the victims.

All responsible Government agencies must work, and are working hard to ensure that they are prepared to effectively implement the Act when it is gazetted. They are striving to ensure that the systems are in place, the resources are available, and their staff appropriately trained so that the Act can achieve its desired impact – minimising violence in the family.

In this context it is important for all stakeholders to work together in the fight to end family and gender based violence and to take a multi-sectorial approach rather than working in silos. The RSIPF has close relationships with a number of stakeholders who assist with enforcement and support to survivors of violence, including Seif Ples, the Christian Care Centre, the Family Support Centre, the Honiara City Council, the National Referral Hospital to mention a few.

At this juncture it is important to recognise the valuable and selfless work of the many agencies, organisations and churches who offer their time and resources to provide humanitarian assistance to the victims. I can say from an RSIPF perspective that we greatly value this contribution.

The RSIPF is stepping up our efforts to combat the problem. In addition to our very active community engagement and awareness programs we are actively preparing for and supporting the implementation of the Family Protection Act. We have co-hosted two implementation working group workshops which have included all stakeholders, and we are committed to an implementation date of 1 April 2016.

We have developed our training program and manuals for the Act and we will conduct a “train the trainer” program at the start of next month preparatory to training all officers in the first quarter of next year. We will continue to work with our partners to ensure that supporting mechanisms are in place to ensure the effective implementation of the Act.

Just as importantly we have redoubled our efforts to ensure we are appropriately responding to and recording complaints of family violence which has led to a large increase in the number of reports this year. However we recognise much more needs to be done.

We will also continue to educate and inform communities about domestic violence and the support services available to survivors of domestic violence. This includes through our website and through engagement with the communities and stakeholders as part of the RSIPF Crime prevention Strategy. This work must and will continue.

While I have concentrated on family violence in these remarks it is important to note that there are other aspects of gender based violence that we must confront.

The RSIPF's Sexual Assault Squad has a primary responsibility of responding to sexual assaults and the investigation of major sexual assault offences provided under the Penal Code.

In addition to its primary investigations role the Sexual Assault Squad has also been involved with internal and external stakeholders in the proactive delivery of educational awareness to communities around the country about sexual offences; referral mechanisms for victims; and importantly prevention. As a result of these awareness programs, many young victims have the confidence and willingness to report their cases to police; something which has been a significant challenge in the past. Importantly the Sexual Assault Squad have also been advocating for law reform in this area to ensure that the Penal Code has the appropriate Offence provisions.

The Sexual Assault Unit has noted that most victims are young girls of the age of 18 and below; some as young as three (3) years old. Most offenders are adult males between 30 and 50 years of age; mostly known to and trusted by the victims. Some rape victims are minors or incapacitated persons who are physically or mentally unable to resist their attackers; or who are under the legal age of consent.

The Sexual Assault Squad further noted that in some of the incidents of sexual assault, especially rape incidents, the victims suffered serious bodily injury when offenders used deadly weapons in the commission of the acts.

Sadly, this year, the National Crime Investigations Department of the RSIPF have recorded a total of eight (8) women, including a nine (9) year old girl who have lost their lives as a result of Domestic/Family Violence and other physical acts of violence.

As the Police Commissioner I commit the RSIPF to continue to improve our efforts to protect everyone, women, men, children in domestic relationships. I commit the RSIPF to do everything we can to ensure that the protections within the soon to be implemented Family Protection Act are applied consistently, robustly and effectively. I also commit the RSIPF to doing everything we can to prevent violence against women and girls.

I know however this is not enough. For us to truly deal with the scourge of Family and Gender based violence we must all say “**enough**”! We must all work to change attitudes. We must all show leadership.

A simple way to help reduce violence against women and girls is to start a conversation about violence against women and girls. You can do this at home, with family and friends, in the workplace, within social circles, on social media, or as part of your role as an influential leader in our communities.

We need to change the culture of violence and silence, and speak out, show the courage to say **it is not OK**. Violence in the home - violence against women and girls when are serious issues – not to be ignored or passed by. Family violence is not a private matter but a crime. If we are to end gender based violence we must stand together against it.

We particularly need men to speak out against violence against women. You have seen from the statistics that men are the main perpetrators of violence against women and girls - the main perpetrators of family violence. This doesn't mean and I am not suggesting that the majority of men are involved in this activity. Indeed I am absolutely certain that the vast majority of men are as appalled by this violence as I am.

What it does mean however is that if we are to win this fight, men must take the lead. All good men must take a stand against this violence and refuse to turn a blind eye to what is occurring in their family, their community, their province or their country. They must be supporters of change, and take active steps so change can happen. They must not make excuses for other men who perpetrate violence.

Family and Gender based violence is a crime no matter what cultural, social or personal reasons are raised in a feeble attempt to excuse it.

Some look for excuses for the perpetrators behaviour, they even blame the victim, but we must understand that the perpetrator is responsible for their own behaviour; it is NEVER the victim's fault. Nothing can justify violence against victims, violence is never the answer!

May I conclude by wishing everyone a strong campaign to end family and gender based violence in Solomon Islands. I am sure that if we all commit to taking action and working together for change we can make a difference.



- Honourable Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare,
- Honourable Ministers and Members of Parliament
- Senior Officials of the Government,
- RAMSI Special Coordinator and Members of the Diplomatic Corps and other invited guests
- Ladies and gentlemen.

TAGIO TUMAS