



Fiji Women's Crisis Centre

Newsletter September 2009

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SILVER ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

25 years on, much work remains

A SEXUAL ASSAULT case with no police action after one year of reporting and follow-up.

A woman experiencing domestic violence forced into a mental institution by her family.

A young girl gang-raped by a group of fellow villagers and alienated by her community.

A woman and her children struggling to survive because maintenance payments are delayed.

Imagine trying to provide support and access to justice in a system that is sometimes hostile, a community that has no empathy and there aren't enough resources - day-in, day-out.

But imagine the smile on a child's face after the tears, the gratitude on a woman's face as she has a place to sleep with her five children for the night, and imagine a person in the community saying: "A job well-done, how can I help?"

For the past 25 years, the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre has taken in its stride the challenges of working to eliminate violence against women but it has also celebrated the little triumphs that many would not even notice.

"It all comes back to how we can make a difference in the lives of individual women in our country and throughout the Pacific," said Shamima Ali, Coordinator of FWCC.

Since its establishment in 1984, the FWCC has attended to over 18,000 women who have come mainly with the issue of violence that they were experiencing in their lives.

"While a common response to these women was that they were to blame for what they experienced, our feminist counselling and rights-based approach told women that they did not deserve to be beaten or raped and they had rights under the law but also as human beings; that they deserved to be treated with dignity and were just as equal to men," said Ali.

What initially started as a crisis counseling and support service for sexually assaulted women has grown into an organisation that is trying to eliminate violence against women and children in Fiji and across the Pacific.

"This has meant dealing with the individual women but also trying to bring about structural and societal changes that lead to the empowerment of women," said Ali.

While the FWCC's services, which now include research, community education and awareness and advocacy in addition to the



Shamima Ali and Tom Wilson (NZAID) sign the 6-year contract

\$3.5m NZAID support for FWCC

NZAID HAS extended funding arrangement for the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre in its work to prevent and respond to violence against women in Fiji on the eve of the centre's 25th anniversary.

An agreement between NZAID and FWCC was signed on July 2, which will deliver F\$3.5 million over a six-year period.

The funds will support the work of Fiji Women's Crisis Centre branches in Ba, Nadi and Labasa, as well as the establishment of a centre in Rakiraki.

The branches outside Suva cover the rural areas of Fiji, where violence against women is a pervasive issue. Rakiraki, at the northern part of the main island of Viti Levu has been earmarked for a new centre because of the increasing problem of gender-based violence in the district.

"New Zealand is pleased to be supporting this funding arrangement with the FWCC given the huge toll that violence against women has on families, individuals and communities," said Tom Wilson, NZAID Manager in Suva. "We recognise and support the critical role that FWCC plays in providing services to rural, urban and informal

settlement communities across Fiji." FWCC Coordinator Shamima Ali welcomed the continuation of New Zealand's long-standing support and noted that there is a strong correlation between poverty, the economic status of women and violence against women. "We are grateful to the New Zealand Government for providing us with this support which has enabled us to work towards the empowerment of women experiencing violence in their lives particularly through our Branches which are working effectively in the rural areas throughout Fiji," Ali said. New Zealand has been providing direct support to the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre branches since 2000.

The FWCC is an autonomous, multi-racial, non-government organisation that was established in 1984, with the goal of eliminating violence against women in Fiji and the Pacific region. Its branches in Suva, Nadi, Labasa and Ba deal with about 1000-1500 new cases and just as many repeat cases of violence-related incidents in a year. New Zealand's support is closely coordinated with Australia's commitment to assist FWCC over the same time frame.

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25 years on, much work remains

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counselling, are now housed in a modern structure, life was not so easy in the early days.

"There was a lot of resistance to our work and in particular the feminist approach which we took to the issue of violence against women," said Ali.

That resistance was also evident in the lack of support from Government and the difficulty in accessing funds for dealing with issues that did not fit within the development agenda.

"We pushed for the recognition of the issue as a developmental issue because many people don't see the detrimental effects of violence against women - not just on individual women but their families, their communities and the nation as a whole," said Ali.

This has contributed to greater recognition of the issue even at regional level, with the first official acknowledgement from the Pacific Islands Forum of the seriousness of gender-based violence. That acknowledgement coincided with the FWCC's 25th anniversary celebrations in August. Through the demand from other countries in the region, FWCC expanded its programs to take a regional approach and in 1992 established the Pacific Women's Network Against Violence Against Women.

"The Pacific community is so culture-bound and when it comes to women, it is even more so," said Ali.

This has meant strategising with women from other countries on how best to tackle issues of culture and religion which are evident not just in the community but also in government services and among policy makers.

"Now, a significant achievement for the women of the Pacific is the fact that the Forum Leaders have recognised the impact of violence against women and have made a commitment to addressing it," said Ali.

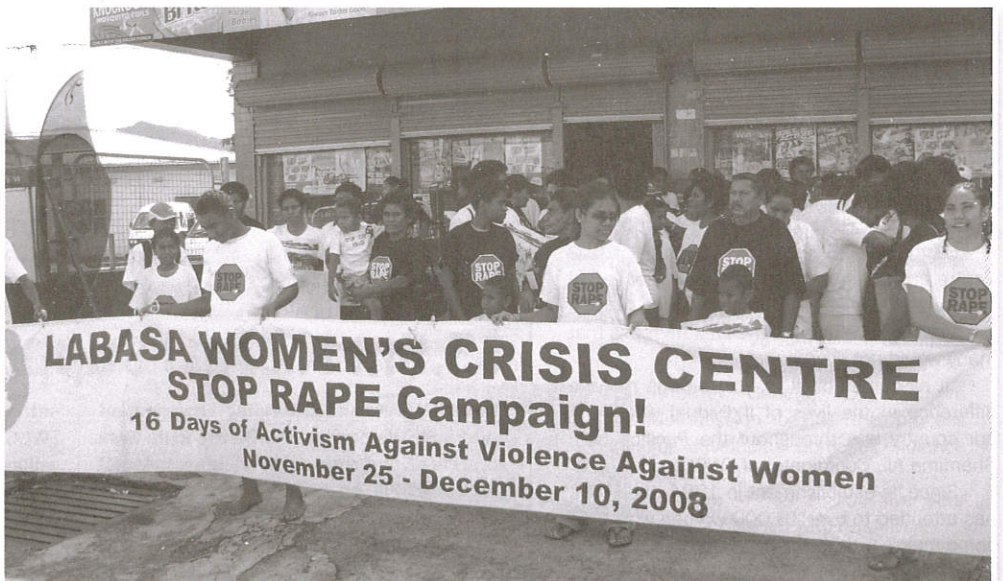
For the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, there's no time to rest on its laurels.

"Apart from the fact that we still have to deal with many clients, we are challenged by the changing dynamics of the violence they experience, the conflicts which have been taking place in different countries in the region, the rise in fundamentalism and the lack of a rights-based approach to the issue," said Ali.

"We mark the fact that we have survived this long and grown during these past 25 years but we also have to work even harder to ensure that all women, regardless of age, ethnicity, religious or economic background or ability are treated as they deserve to be treated - with dignity and respect."



Former Trustees of FWCC - Bessie Ali, the late Lady Munro and the late Adi Kuini Speed and Jon Apted with Shamima (1989)



International Day of Action Against VAW Labasa 2008



Community education in the rural areas

OUR HISTORY IN PICTURES



FWCC marks 20 years, trustees and staff blow out the candles



The Reclaim the Night March has become a tradition in Suva



Human Rights Day March, Ba



Mobilising in Nadi

A brief history of FWCC's branches

The Fiji Women's Crisis Centre has three branches in Nadi, Ba and Labasa. The branches are multi-racial, non-government organisations committed to the betterment of women's lives through collective efforts against violence. The centre operates on the principle of empowerment of women and is based on the conviction that women's rights are human rights.

Ba Women's Crisis Centre

In 1991, concerned at the huge increase in violent assaults against women in Ba, the late social worker Veena Singh sought the support of women from the Soroptimist Club of Ba to meet and discuss ways to establish a crisis counselling service. With the help of the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre in Suva and resource persons from the area, a two-week training workshop was held for 40 women in February 1992.

This led to the establishment of a small group of women, working on a voluntary basis, who provided counselling to those in need. Later in 1992, an office with part-time staff was opened through the assistance of overseas donors and fundraising by the Soroptimist Club.

Today, the centre is run as a collective, with full-time staff and volunteers. From June 1999 to June 2009, the Ba Centre has served a total of 3138 new cases and 7478 repeat clients:

Labasa Women's Crisis Centre

In 1991, after attending a counsellor training workshop and awareness raising on violence against women, a small group of volunteers led by Bimla Singh of Labasa, started to work with individual victims and began speaking to women's groups and at schools. Other women became interested and in May 1994, 28 women formed the Labasa Women's Crisis Centre following training with FWCC. The volunteers used Bimla Singh's home and telephone as their contact to counsel women, accompany them to court, conduct fund-raising activities and give talks to community groups and schools. Today, the Labasa centre is run as a collective, with full-time staff and volunteers. From June 1999 to June 2009, the Labasa Centre has served a total of 2610 new cases and 3267 repeat clients.

Nadi Women's Crisis Centre

Established in November 2003, the Nadi

Women's Crisis Centre is funded by the New Zealand Government through its aid agency, the New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID). The centre serves the cane-belt areas from Lautoka, Nadi to Sigatoka. This includes surrounding villages and rural settlements.

The centre was first set up in Lautoka after women in the city expressed their need for counselling and support services for victims and survivors of violence. Shamima Ali, the FWCC Coordinator, was invited to explain the details of operating and managing a crisis centre. In December 1994, a group of some 20 women from the area attended a weeklong training course conducted by the FWCC focusing on basic counselling skills. Out of this group, 13 women volunteered their time as counsellors, which led to the formation of the Lautoka Women's Crisis Centre.

In November 2003, the Lautoka Women's Crisis Centre closed and the operation was moved to Nadi to cater for the increase in clients coming from the Nadi and Sigatoka areas.

From June 1999 to June 2009, the Nadi Centre has served a total of 2989 new cases and 2774 repeat clients.

Milestones in FWCC's 25-year history

August 13, 1984 - The FWCC opens its doors. The Centre attended to eight clients for the last four months of the year. Staffed by volunteers.

1984 onwards - Hard lobby against insensitive comments by police, judges and magistrates during cases of sexual assault.

1985 - First paid staff - 1.

1986 - The establishment of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement. 2 paid staff and volunteers.

1988 - Tour of Australia - Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne. Met Elizabeth Cox and Juliet Hunt.

1990 - First long-term grant. Three-year grant from AusAID (then AIDAB) through Freedom from Hunger/Community Aid Abroad.

1992 - First Pacific Regional Workshop on Violence Against Women was held and the setting up of the Pacific Women's Network Against Violence Against Women.

1992 - Ba Women's Crisis Centre established and funded by Australian High Commission.

1994 - Second phase of funding for four years from the Australian Government. This was the first direct contract between the Australian Government and the FWCC.

1994 - Labasa Women's Crisis Centre established and funded by Canada Fund.

1995 - Training of police and establishment of the Sexual Offences Unit.

1995 - Introduction of the No-Drop Policy on domestic violence by the Police Commissioner following complaints that reconciliation was being forced upon women in reported cases of domestic violence.

1995 - Fourth World Conference for Women in Beijing. The Fiji Government makes a commitment to eliminate violence against women as one of its critical areas of concern.

1995 - First Regional Training Program conducted by the FWCC - 3 participants.

1996 - The FWCC makes a draft submission to the Fiji Law Reform Commission for legislation for domestic violence.

1996 - Second Pacific Regional Meeting Against Violence Against Women in the Pacific. Consolidation of the Pacific Women's Network Against Violence Against Women.

1998 - Fiji Government launching of the Women's Plan of Action; based on the commitments at the Fourth World Conference on Women. Setting up of the Violence Against Women Taskforce - an NGO and Government committee;

- The FWCC begins its first national research on the Incidence, Prevalence and Nature of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault;
- FWCC client numbers pass the 1000 mark per year;
- NGO Coalition for Human Rights set up by the



One of the earlier buildings where FWCC rented - now the Westpac building on Gordon Street



The original FWCC building on Gordon Street



The New FWCC headquarters

FWCC.

1999 - Third Phase of funding from Australian Government for five years through a direct contract with AusAID.

1999 - The FWCC takes on the Managing Agent role for the Vanuatu Women's Centre through a direct contract with AusAID.

2000 - Biggest Reclaim the Night march in the history of FWCC public activism since its establishment. An increased number of men and families joined the march for safer streets and homes.

2001 - Third Regional Meeting on Violence Against Women in the Pacific. Emerging issue - impact of conflicts in the region on women;

- FWCC research on the impact of the coup on women in Fiji;
- Results of FWCC national research on domestic violence and sexual assault released. *Findings*: 66% of women surveyed have been beaten. Intensified lobbying for DV legislation.

2002 February - First full two-week annual training for the Fiji Military Forces;

• **November** - First male training on women's human rights with the Violence Against Women Taskforce.

• First joint campaign with the Fiji government through the VAW Taskforce.

• Research paper by Governor of the Reserve Bank on the economic cost of violence against women in Fiji, estimated at F\$300 million per year.

2003 July - Vanuatu advocacy training for men on violence against women;

• Bill for the improvement in sentencing guidelines for sexual offences introduced by the Attorney General followed by intensive lobbying. • **November** - Nadi Women's Crisis Centre established.

2004 January - Domestic Violence Reference given by Attorney General. Law Reform Commission begins the process for developing domestic violence legislation;

• **June** - F\$4 million five year contract signed with AusAID.

2005 - Fourth Pacific Regional Meeting Against Violence Against Women;

• **November-December** - Cook Islands Male Advocacy Training Against Violence Against Women.

2006 December - Opening of the new FWCC \$1million building, funded by AusAID to provide intensified services and a research unit;

• Launch of FWCC 'Gender Relations, Women's Human Rights and Violence Against Women Trainer's Manual.

2007 August - Tonga Male Advocacy for Women's Human Rights.

2009 June - Fifth Pacific Regional Meeting Against Violence Against Women;

• **July** - F\$3 million six year contract for the Labasa, Ba, Nadi and Rakiraki branches signed by NZAID;

• **July** - Regional Training Programme; total number of participants stands at 304 since the course started in 1995.