



# FIJI WOMEN'S CRISIS CENTRE

## NEWSLETTER

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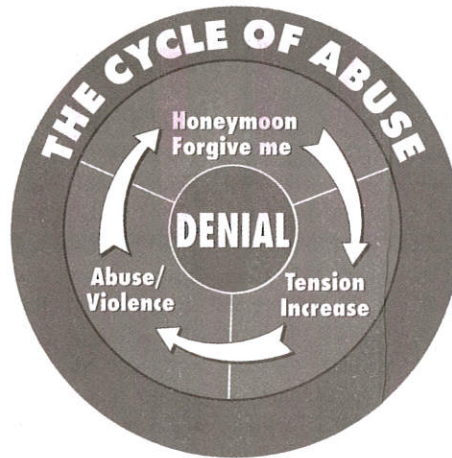
October 2001

## Woman takes abusive man to court - after 40 yrs of marriage

One fine Sunday in a little village on an island out of Suva, a woman is brutally kicked, punched and beaten repeatedly by her own husband as she lies helplessly screaming on her back with a piece of cloth her attacker used to cover her face. Later, the woman's unremorseful assailant/husband confesses to a relative who also happens to be a police officer that if he had had a knife, he would have killed her right there and then himself. Just another domestic violence story you may say but this couple are in their 60s. The abusive husband, 62 and the battered wife, 60. Furthermore, the abuse has gone on for over 40 years now and even though it has been reported and the man put on trial, the only punishment he got from the law was a bound over sentence for two years. Now the distraught, battered woman, Mere, has stepped out of her silent cage of bitter suffering to tell her story. And it took a lot of courage, says FWCC Counsellor, Salote Malo who spoke to her.

Domestic violence is a common and increasing problem in Fiji. Women have died. Children have become traumatized as a result. Even the police force is not exempt from domestic crimes. Just a few months ago in May, a police constable was charged with the murder of his wife in Ba. Police Commissioner, Isikia Savua tried to put the blame on the political crisis last year but FWCC Coordinator, Shamima Ali, countered that by saying that domestic violence has always been there even before May 19th 2000. And that stress is no

excuse for murder or any other types of violence. Nevertheless, domestic violence is increasing rapidly these days. The government has done little to amend it's policies and laws concerning violence in the home which is still been seen as a private matter. Only the few brave women like Mere, are able to get their stories heard in court. But even then the offenders often get light sentences from nine months in jail to a bound over sentence where the



accused does not go to jail but is only warned not to commit another offence within a specified period of time. Mere's abusive husband, Saula got the latter twice. The first time he got the bound over sentence imposed on him on his island he broke it by following his wife to Suva and assaulting her there. He used all kinds of threats on her including cutting her throat with a knife if she did not withdraw the case but the long suffering Mere remained firm and unmoving, deriving strength from her supportive children and her God.

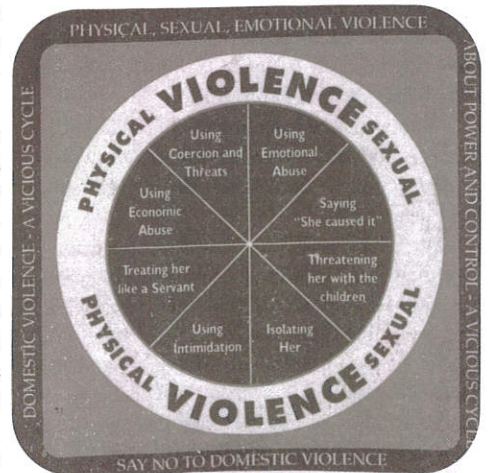
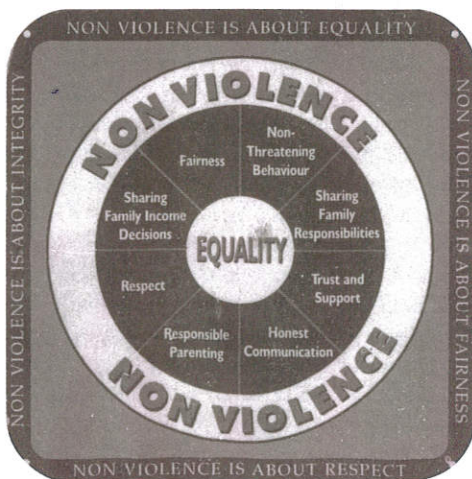
The case was brought to Suva where the aging abuser who only used a walking stick when he went to court pitifully asked the presiding Magistrate to give him a sentence that was appropriate for someone of his age. Apparently the female Magistrate fell for it and gave him another bound over sentence for two years much to Mere's disappointment. "I wanted to see him put away behind bars so that the law can teach him a lesson and make him change his ways," Mere said to FWCC Counsellor, Salote.

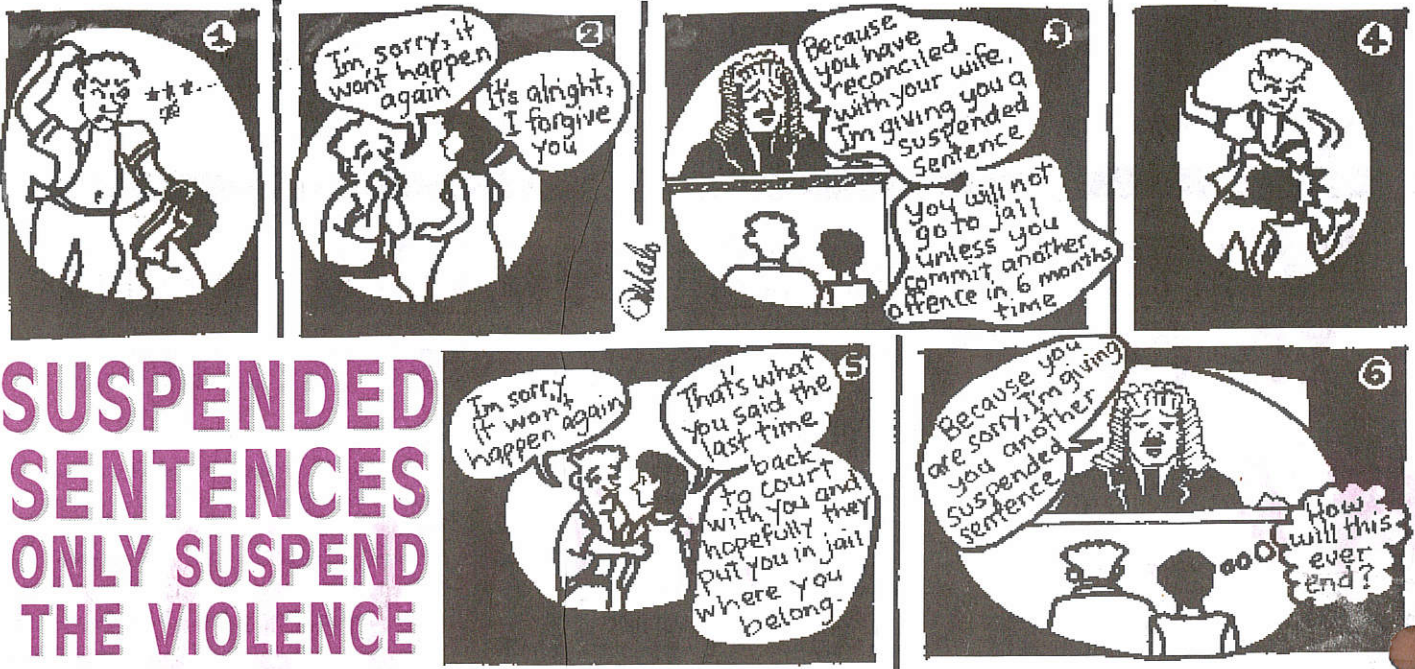
The presence of the FWCC in dealing with

women's problems and offering encouragement has resulted in a large number of domestic violence cases being brought to the attention of the media and the police. So far this year about 50 cases of domestic violence has been highlighted in the media. In most of these cases it is the man who is the perpetrator. The police has a 'No-drop' policy in place to deal with matters of domestic violence. The 'No Drop Policy' which was introduced in 1995 simply means that "Violence between heterosexual adults who are living together as husband and wife (conjugal relationship) will be fully investigated and offenders taken to court. This policy applies to police officers too and under no circumstance will police officers promote reconciliation in (DV) cases".

The law does have it's flaws when it comes to dealing with abused women and their male abusers. If this is not disheartening enough, the woman brave enough to come out with her story is either told to reconcile with her assailant or is ridiculed by those who are supposed to be helping her by upholding the law. Mere suffered such treatment by some of the police officers who did not take her seriously and by the female Magistrate who sympathized with her husband instead of the victim. Mere's abuse started even before she was married. The impressionable 16 year old was brought up by her married sister as both her parents had passed away when she was only a child. By the time she was 16 she eloped

• Turn to page 2





## SUSPENDED SENTENCES ONLY SUSPEND THE VIOLENCE

### Woman takes abusive man to court

• from page 1

with her 18 year old lover to his village. Never for once did she envisage that the young man by her side would turn out to be a violent batterer.

Then one day it happened. For the mild soft spoken Mere, the beating came as a shock. Mere was having lunch with a cousin at a neighbour's house when Saula suddenly appeared and demanded that she leave with him immediately. Out of courtesy for her neighbour who had asked her in, Mere replied to her then defacto husband that she would go with him after finishing her lunch. To which Saula furiously commanded, "You come here or I'll come there!" Confused and frightened the young Mere hurriedly tried to finish her meal so that she could attend to Saula's needs. However, she was stopped up short as her livid defacto husband stalked into the neighbour's house, grabbed her by the hair and pulled her. She fell to the ground and he continued to beat her and kick her on the chest.

Finally he led her home crying in pain and humiliation. Mere went back to her sister's place but he came begging for forgiveness and Mere's sister told her to return.

Mere and Saula got married at the church on the island and for awhile they lived together harmoniously until after their third child was born.

They had just returned from visiting a neighbouring settlement on a Monday morning and Mere was looking for the spoons which had disappeared. Saula asked her where the spoons were and when she said that she didn't know, he gave her a punch that knocked her out for a couple of minutes. She lost two of her teeth. After the sixth child, he told her he was tired of living with her. When filled with hurt she went to her sister's place, he followed

bringing with him, her brother who pleaded in his place for Mere to return. She did. They had seven more children and as they got older Saula became even more rough in his manner both to her and to the children.

Finally, one day she had had it. They were about to have their family prayers one morning when Saula started complaining loudly that their son who had just returned from prison did not listen to him and should be chased out of the house. When Mere intervened and said "This is not how we should talk to our children, if you have something to say, say it calmly and firmly to the child", Saula accused her of taking the children's side against him. When she denied this, he lunged at her, squeezed her neck with one hand and grabbed hold of her mouth with the other hand and attempted to

**Before I had children [Saula] kicked me on this side [of her chest] and the hurt still persists today.**

twist her neck. With all the strength she could muster, Mere pushed him away from her and went out of the house. After waiting for an apology that was not forthcoming, Mere got dressed and headed down to the police station where she reported the incident and showed them the bruises she sustained. Before she made that monumental first step to liberation, she informed her children of her decision and they all supported her.

Saula was given a bound over sentence on his island which he broke by following his wife to Suva and beating her up there. Mere made sure that this breach of the law was made known and Saula was brought before a Suva magistrate who gave him a further bound over sentence for two years. This time Saula complied with the ruling and shortly after the case he returned to the island saying before he left

that Mere could remain in Suva for as long as she wanted to and that she was free to do as she wished.

For Mere this was a great relief. She has quite a few supporters both men and women including her own fully grown children and Salote of the FWCC who provided moral support during the hearing of the case. Even though the case is now over, Mere will still have to live with the trauma and the bruises.

"...Before I had children [Saula] kicked me on this side [of her chest] and the hurt still persists today. Starting from the first child until the thirteenth, I never once carried them on my back. I never encouraged carrying them because as soon as I lift something heavy the pain comes." Mere told Salote. When Salote asked if Saula ever offers to massage her when the pain comes, she said no and sometimes if he has beaten her he does not even make the effort to reconcile or at least say he is sorry. It is often Mere who is the first to make moves towards reconciling. She says she is thankful for the outcome of the trial and that now she can sleep well and she has the love and support of her children who have stuck by her through thick and thin.

Salote says that many women are faced with this type of problem but are too afraid to seek help. "They may know what they should do but they are too afraid to do anything. But for [Mere] to go ahead and do it, that is something momentous. That's one big step for Mere." Now perhaps other abused women regardless of age, colour or creed will start coming out of their hiding places with their stories and empower or induce even more women and girls to do the same in the hope of leaving the world better and safer than they found it.

*\*(Actual names have been changed to protect the identities of the people concerned)*

# 66% of women hit: survey

66% of women in Fiji have been hit by their partners at some point in their lives. This is part of the startling revelation of the National Research on Domestic Violence conducted in Fiji by the FWCC. Released on September 13, the data will be used to push for changes in laws so that women who are in violent situations can be protected by the law.

## OTHER FRIGHTENING FACTS FROM THE FWCC NATIONAL RESEARCH STUDY:

- Domestic Violence comprises only 10% of all assault and murder cases reported to the police. However 80% of those surveyed in the FWCC National Research had witnessed violence in their own homes.
- According to police data, cases of violence perpetrated by a partner or ex-partner constitute 86% of domestic violence cases.
- 98.4% of domestic violence cases involved male perpetrators and female victims.
- 66% of women and 17% of men reported that they have been hit by their partners at some point in their life.
- 41% of men surveyed in the FWCC National Research Study admitted they had hit their partners.
- 42% of the women who had experienced violence from their partners had been hit while they were pregnant.
- 49% of the respondents to the FWCC National Research Study said that their mother had been beaten by their father.



Magistrates Salote Kaimacuata (far right) and Laisa Lareti (\*far left) took time off to participate in the Research Seminar.



Shamima, Edwina and Sarah respond to questions.

# Rural women feel isolated

*“Come back again and bring us more information!” was the message our FWCC staff got when they went to Sigatoka recently.*

On the 6th to the 10th of August, FWCC Staff, Adelle Khan; Yishu Lal, Bhumija Kumar along with long time volunteer, Ilisapeci Maria went to Keiyasi and Valley Road in Sigatoka bringing the men enlightenment and the women empowerment as to the rights of women and children. The FWCC staff gave community education at Keiyasi and held workshops at Valley Road for three days. Ms Lal said that the main thing they observed in Valley Road was how isolated the people felt they were.

“The women and children are deprived of all social and education issues as they live very far,” Ms Lal said. “They feel isolated and finance is a problem. They may come out to town only once in every two months.” They also do not have access to good water supply and electricity. Of education, Ms Lal said the only thing children were taught there was what was in the school curriculum. Following the visit the teachers had pressed for more information on Child Sexual Abuse and the rights of children as they and the children have no chance of going out to learn those issues on



Yishu talks about legal rights with the women.



Children learn about the issue of child abuse.

their own. Other issues of concern in both Valley Road and Keiyasi were emotional abuse or violence, extra marital affairs, Child Sexual

Abuse and even suicide. These problems although evident were not talked about openly because the people feared it would cause shame leading to family break-ups. It was only with the arrival of the FWCC team that the people of Keiyasi and Valley Road got the chance and encouragement to freely discuss these controversial issues. Ms Lal noted that the men were as interested as the women and gave them support.

Just a couple of weeks after the FWCC visit, a woman wrote to Ms Lal saying how happy they all were about the visit and that they would be grateful for another similar gesture. She added that the FWCC should consider sending someone down to hold more community workshops and education in the area because just after the FWCC visit, a woman was raped and another was beaten. The visit to Keiyasi and Valley Road provided the inspiration for women in those areas to speak out against rape and domestic violence when previously they were silent.

Therefore as seen from the letter and the feedback from the visit there definitely needs to be more information passed out to Keiyasi and Valley Road residents about the human rights of the woman and child.

# Meet our counsellors

## Ain't I A Woman



Look at me, look at me,  
I have worked hard  
Borne beautiful children,  
Do you say I am not a woman?

What am I now, just a bore,  
I was minding the kids at night  
While you were in your depth of sleep.

I lost my energy and sleep caring for you all,  
Look at me now, nothing but bones.

I have used my strength, lost my beauty  
and time, and you say I ain't a woman.

I wear the band of a slave,  
whilst you bear an honoured name

Can you blame me for what I am today?  
If I have learnt to think,  
Have I sinned  
when I acknowledged my rights?

No more, no more,  
I am moving towards happiness  
From the shattered world of men  
to my own paradise

Yishu Lal, 1995

## Listen to us on radio every week

You can listen to FWCC staff on the radio talking about the work of the Crisis Centre and the issues that we deal with. These radio programs are available in English, Fijian and Hindi on the Bula Network.

**Fijian:** 3.15 pm on Bula 102 FM  
Every second Sunday, starting 28th January

**English:** 9.30am on Bula 100.4 FM  
Every Tuesday, starting 30th January

**Hindi:** 10.00am on Radio Fiji 2  
Every Thursday starting 1st February

### Bhumija Kumar

Bhumija first joined the FWCC four months ago. In May of this year Bhumija was a regional trainee with the centre for one month. She was so impressed with the activities at the Centre that she decided to apply for a job as a part-time counsellor. In July the 1st she signed up as a volunteer then in August she was selected to be part of the part-time counselling team. Bhumija took her first trip as a part-time counsellor with three other counsellors in August to Sigatoka where they concluded Community Education along with some workshops to the people of Keiyasi and Valley Road. Bhumija says of her trip; "I learnt how hard life was for the women. They have to get up at 4.30am and work all day in the farm on top of their cooking and washing and looking after the children and they only go to bed at 11.30pm after a hard day's work. They don't have electricity or running water and no entertainment as we know it here." Bhumija says of her work here; "I love to help women and to empower them with useful information like their rights as women and the rights of their children and how to use it."



### Losalini Rokotakala

Losalini also joined the FWCC Regional Training in May of this year. She too was so impressed with the work the Centre does that in June she joined as a volunteer counsellor. After just one month the FWCC took her on probation as a part-time counsellor. Losalini is happy in her work as she enjoys helping women to get their lives back together and says it is rewarding to see these women become able to cope with their own problems. She finds the work very challenging. Losalini has six children, all boys and all now of school age from Form 6 to Class 1. Losalini was a full time homemaker from the time her eldest son was born in 1982 until this year when her youngest started school and she decided to pursue a career. Losalini says of her work; "I have learnt a lot of new things from here. For example, when clients come with their problems you have to have a strong heart to be able to listen and share with them." Nevertheless, she is happy with her unique job as a women's counsellor. "Some women live happily and some keep all of their problems bottled up inside but when they come here they are able to pour out their feelings and emotions."



Today's Fiji society faces a dramatic increase in rape of

women and molestation of children. This frightening fact can only suggest it is time for the law to enforce a radical solution that will stop or deter such horrific crimes.

Everyday we hear about another person being raped or sexually abused. For those people, the psychological consequences of this despicable violation will haunt them until they die. The rapist will serve time in a prison, this will merely take them off the streets for a while. There should be life sentence or a more severe punishment.

However, the decision should be made and introduced by political parties as a policy platform and now that the elections are approaching, sex offenders deserve the most severe punishment under the law. There is no room for sympathy in cases of sexual abuses, rape or child sex. They are despicable acts which shatter the lives of victims and their families, especially when the victims feel the offender has not been punished to their satisfaction.

Victims of sexual abuse or their families should have the right to express how they

## Letters to the editor

feel the attacker should be punished.

The court should be more informed of their views, perhaps from a victim impact statement to make sure they have contributed in some way to the offender's punishment. This option would involve voluntary participation on behalf of the victim or their family.

Finally, all these points should be taken into consideration and rape or sex offenders should be subject to the most stringent punishment that the court can enforce.

Mrs Harsika Nitin Patel

## Abusive behaviours are transmitted to the next generation

Children learn most about parenting in their own childhood. Abused children are most likely than other children to repeat the abuse when they have children of their own.

