

ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER RT HON GRAND CHIEF
SIR MICHAEL SOMARE GCL GCMG CH CF KStJ
AT THE SUB REGIONAL WORKSHOP ON SPECIAL MEASURES FOR
ADVANCING WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN LEGISLATURES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Minister for Community Development Dame Carol Kidu and her
Department Secretary Joe Klapat,
Representatives from AusAID, NZAID,
UN Agencies in PNG,
Pacific Island Forum Secretariat,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I take this opportunity to welcome all participants from Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji including Papua New Guinea whose noble aim during this workshop is to find ways forward in advancing women's representation in all our parliaments in the region.

This fact is no more pronounced than in PNG where our population is around 6.1 million yet we have had in the last 15 years (come 2012) only one woman representative in parliament.

While these are decisions made by the voters of Papua New Guinea, we as the members of the legislature should be doing much more to change the mindset of our voters to give women equal consideration when polling time comes around.

I personally as you may know have continually supported the advancement of women since Independence.

When we were looking for skilled Papua New Guineans back in 1975, my government then recognised such pioneer public servants as the late Dame Rose Kekedo and our current High Commissioner in London Ms Jean Kekedo. We did not think twice about them taking over as heads of departments from Australian MALE administrators.

And we had no regrets as both these women went on to make enormous contributions to the early development of our nation.

While pioneer women politicians such as Dame Josephine Abaijah was not given a ministry during her terms in parliament, two women under my leadership as prime minister were given ministries; namely Nahau Rooney (Justice) and for two of her three terms in office, Dame Carol Kidu (Community Development).

I realise that not all my colleagues are keen to positively discriminate in favour of women or to even recognise the value that both genders can add to the development process.

Sadly there are some whose minds are already made up on the rightful place of women in our Pacific Island Societies.

But I am confident that with the new generation of leadership in the region today and persistent lobbying and awareness we can overcome some of these hurdles.

As members of the legislature we too have our part to play in increasing the representation of women in our parliaments.

There is already provision in the PNG constitution, for instance, for nominated members of parliament and Dame Carol has been actively encouraging its implementation.

Alternatively there is the option of introducing reserved seats for women. While I find this latter option favourable it will take longer to introduce than Section 101 that already exists.

Both these options have their supporters and opponents. But we must start somewhere and sooner rather than later.

Apart from legislation there are other little steps that can be taken to ensure women candidates are not forced out of the race through intimidation and harassment and that woman voters equally are not pushed to vote for candidates selected by their male relatives.

One of the simple ways forward is to have separate polling booths; one for women and one for men. The electoral Commission has a large role to play in providing an environment that encourages free choice by women voters.

Since taking office 6 years ago we have made tremendous progress in the appointment of qualified women into executive positions in government. by appointing women on merit to these high positions in office sets the scene for further acceptance in society of the role of women in our developing democracies.

At this juncture, I acknowledge the contributions of Ms Margaret Elias, Acting Chief Secretary to Government and Secretary for Personal Management; Ms Winnie Kiap, Secretary to Cabinet and Acting Secretary, Department of PM; Ms Hitelai Polume, Secretary to Justice; Ms Betty Palaso, Commissioner of Internal Revenue Commission and Ms Nelly James, Secretary to the Department of Mines.

This is encouraging because I think the condition today is right for us to push more aggressively for equal participation in the decision making process of our governments.

My personal thoughts are that it is also up to women to be a little more assertive. Nobody likes a person male or female who is too aggressive but everyone admires strength of character, integrity and most of all performance.

I think women are blessed with feminine attributes of gentleness, empathy and a nurturing spirit. I believe women must take advantage of these traits to offer a leadership that is different to men but at the same time complimentary in all aspects of nation building.

Our nations of the Pacific need to have both gender representations in parliament if we are to realise our full potentials in this global environment.

We can no longer argue that custom stops us from recognising women as equal partners in our development when our aspirations are to embrace many western ideals and concepts.

I welcome and acknowledge the support of our development partners in this regard towards achieving the objective of increasing women's representation in parliament.

I therefore take this opportunity to thank the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat for its initiative to hold this important workshop.

I also thank our development partners AusAID, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, UNIFEM Pacific, UNDP Pacific Centre, International Development Law Organisation, Inter-Parliamentary Union, PNG Sustainable Development Programme Limited and the Ministry and Department of Community Development.

Finally, I want to assure participants that I will continue to support Dame Carol Kidu in her tireless efforts to bring more women to parliament. But I also call for the support of women and development partners towards appropriate and greater awareness on the value of our women.

I will do my part in encouraging my colleague ministers and members of parliament to support legislation to have greater representation of women in the legislature.

Lastly, I wish you well in your deliberations over the next two days and look forward to reading the outcomes of your workshop at the next Forum Leaders Meeting in Australia.