

Women and Children Crisis Centre (WCCC) Tonga turns 5

Tonga

SHARE

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‘Ofa Guttenbeil-Likiliki may have one of the toughest jobs in Tonga.

The Director of the Women and Children Crisis Centre (WCCC) Tonga, and her staff, deal with cases of domestic violence, rape, incest and other forms of sexual and physical abuse involving women and children, on a daily basis. As the Centre turns five this month, Guttenbeil-Likiliki takes some time out to speak to Pacific Women on some of the challenges and triumphs of half a decade’s work.

In Tonga, 3 out of 4 women have experienced physical or sexual violence over their lifetime^[1] and despite this statistic, there are many who would prefer not to acknowledge the existence of such crimes in the island nation. The staff at the Centre however, are adamant that they will continue operating for as long as women and children need assistance.

For Ms Guttenbeil-Likiliki, it is about being true to the woman or child who has chosen to share their story and seek help.

“I’m very aware there are people who absolutely hate it when I open my mouth; and there are people who are very thankful because they learn from our advocacy – it’s like a complete breakthrough,” shared Ms Guttenbeil-Likiliki.

The Centre was founded by staff who wanted an organisation that would advocate for women’s and children’s human rights based on the lived realities of Tongan women, girls and children who have experienced and survived all forms of violence. Over the years, important relationships have been forged and strengthened with key agencies such as the police, Ministries of Education, Health and court staff with the understanding that the Centre was part of the national effort to eliminate violence against women and children.

Since its inception, Ms Guttenbeil-Likiliki cannot remember a single woman or child ever reporting a case of violence or abuse immediately after it happened.

“The fact that she has chosen to walk through our doors or has contacted us whether by telephone or social media means she is at a crisis point. Most of the time, we are the very last people or organisation she would come to because she’s reached that crisis point. Women can be victims of violence from the first day of the relationship and put up with it for up to 30 years. It is typically those who have been abused over and over again who finally make the decision to seek help”.

Challenges and successes

When the Centre started, one of the biggest challenges it faced was to gain the confidence and trust of the wider community as many were skeptical of its motives and even the need for its existence.

While discussions around domestic violence has become relatively receptive in the country in the last five years, sex crimes, especially those involving children, remain a taboo topic.

“We’re telling communities that these issues are current and real in Tonga; that it has been happening for quite a long time and that we have to start talking about it. We are also raising an understanding for communities to accept that women and men, girls and boys are equal and that violence against women is a crime,” said Ms Guttenbeil-Likiliki.

According to Ms Guttenbeil-Likiliki, through a recent Stay Safe programme held at local schools, students received My Ten Rules of Safety pamphlets, discussing the difference between a good touch and a bad touch. While this move initially received criticism from parents, it later proved to be successful as it provided parents the language needed to discuss such issues with children.

“Most feel uncomfortable telling the children about it. They just never contemplated that it was happening in Tonga,” she added.

Seeking help

When a woman visits WCCC and relates her experience of violence, she is given some options by the Centre on what she can do next. And there are not many options. One option is to go to the safe house or return to where she fled from. She chooses how to move forward. Any advice the Centre gives is as realistic as possible and based on facts so as not to raise any false hopes. She is told the length of time before a case is likely to appear in court; the number of times police will contact her and others for their testimonies; the impact of not having a medical report, especially if it is a rape case. Based on these challenges, the WCCC is able to continue lobbying and advocating for positive reform in these obvious gaps in service provision by all relevant agencies.

Keeping the location of the safe house in country with a population of about 120,000, has proven difficult but not impossible.

According to Ms Guttenbeil-Likiliki: “confidentiality is a huge issue in Tonga, so we provide our services and advocacy support using a human rights framework and a whole lot of ethical and professional standard policies”.

Support structures

Pacific Women strongly supports the work of the WCCC and contributes to multi-year core funding. “The Australian Government has supported us financially through various means and the best thing about it is that we’ve always remained behind the driver’s seat. This has been part and parcel of the Centre’s success – being able to roll out programs that are relevant to Tonga and developed specifically from the stories of the victims and survivors and not just a cut and paste job,” she said.

The Centre also works closely with the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre and the Vanuatu Women’s Crisis Centre which often mentor the younger organisation.

On a personal note, Ms Guttenbeil-Likiliki acknowledged the support of her husband, Nasili and her four children, who give her the support needed to lead such challenging and difficult work in Tonga.

[1] National Study on Domestic Violence Against Women in Tonga (2009).