

Tuvalu Traditional Leaders Forum

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'Using threats and violence in our homes and anywhere else is never okay.'

'Each of us have a role to play to protect women and girls against any forms of violence and make sure they are safe at all times and everywhere,' said chair of the Traditional Leaders' Forum of Tuvalu, Mrs Aonga Kofe.

Historically, it is the first time the Traditional Leaders' Forum of Tuvalu has dedicated its annual meeting to ending violence against women and human rights.

Even more significant, is that Tuvalu is a country where talking openly about domestic and family has long been a 'taboo' – now national leaders are speaking out against this crime.

The Forum, organised by the Gender Affairs Department (GAD) of the Ministry of Health, Social Welfare and Gender Affairs, was themed "Let Us Work Together to Make Our Home Safe for Everyone!"

'To solve the issue of violence it is important to frame it in our cultural framework, making the support of the traditional leaders incredibly important to stop family violence,' said GAD's Communications and Campaigns Officer, Salesa Falesene.

'Our traditional customs are bounded by family ties, sharing, caring and loving each other. If you care for one another, you will make sure that no harm would ever come across your family,' Mr Falesene said.

Mr Falesene also acknowledged the work of Lupe Telavi, the lead officer of the Traditional Leaders' Forum.

More than 40 people participated in the forum held in December in Tuvalu's capital Funafuti, including those who joined remotely from the outer islands via the internet. In a COVID-19 adaptation, funding normally used to transport traditional leaders to Funafuti was repurposed to send or provide dedicated IT support to participants in the outer islands.

For many traditional leaders, online meetings are new as a space to dialogue compared with face-to-face meetings.

'In itself, this commitment to meet online shows the willingness of the traditional leaders to be engaged in the solution to end violence against women and girls,' said Mr Falesene.

'It used to be very difficult to talk about domestic violence publicly. People believed that it was not that much of an issue and it was a family matter that had to be dealt with in the home. The shift in conversation has come from the top level in government and with traditional leaders and I think when you have leaders who are pushing this narrative that's important. Now people are recognising – and talking about – how domestic violence creates real suffering for women and children survivors. Family violence challenges the safety and peace of our communities and we all have a role to play to prevent and stop it,' he said.

The Ministry of Health, Social Welfare and Gender Affairs convened the forum to learn from the experience of and get advice from traditional leaders on ways to ensure women and girls are safe at home and everywhere.

Traditional leaders play an essential role in Tuvalu to maintain peace in their community and coordinate actions to ensure the wellbeing of its members.

The purpose of the forum was to support traditional leaders in their role as mediator, peace makers and protectors of their community members as well as identify strategic actions and partnerships to end all forms of violence against women and girls.

The Traditional Leaders' Forum was held at the end of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence (annually commemorated from 25 November to 10 December). Over the 16 Days, a national radio and television media campaign was implemented by GAD in partnership with other government departments and civil society organisations.

During the campaign, Honorable Prime Minister Kausea Natano and Attorney General Eselealofa Apinelu joined other government, civil society and youth leaders and spoke out publicly in a national media campaign, calling for an end to domestic and family violence in Tuvalu.

'If you want to create a peaceful environment free of violence, you have to talk about it. You cannot hide it or sweep the problem under the rug because it makes some people uncomfortable,' said Mr Falesene.

In a show of solidarity, members of parliament and senior government officials also signed a pledge during 16 Days to stand up and fight violence against women and girls in Tuvalu.

'The Prime Minister, Honorable Natano led the way and this is the first time the government has collectively done this, and we did not know what to expect,' added Mr Falesene.

'We had a lot of senior government officials from chief executives, secretariats and even members of parliament publicly support this pledge and this really confirms their stance to stand up for women and girls in Tuvalu.'

Mr Falesene said civil society organisations and women's groups in the community calling for an end to the violence are now being increasingly joined by government's most senior officials and the nation's traditional leaders.

'The Traditional Leaders' Forum is important because, through it, the leaders gave their "blessing" to all of us to continue informing, raising awareness, supporting the survivors and helping each other to prevent domestic violence,' he said.

The forum provided an opportunity for traditional leaders to identify the need for domestic violence services across Tuvalu. The traditional leaders supported the idea of establishing safehouses to provide refuge for survivors of family violence, including in the outer islands.

A temporary safehouse has been set up in Funafuti and was opened in early December.

'This is just a temporary set up which provides immediate physical separation for victims of domestic violence from the physical environment,' Mr Falesene said.

He added that the conversation about the need to stop domestic violence needs to be ongoing.

'It is part of our everyday life and so it needs to be part of our everyday conversation. It is tough, but we are adamant that we can change that,' he said.

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