



International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women

November 25, 2016

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To commemorate the **International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (#OrangeDay)**¹, the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (AFPPD) is pleased to share excerpts from an interview with Hon. Ms. Niki Rattle, Speaker of the Parliament of Cook Islands. Hon. Ms. Rattle most recently participated in the AFPPD 11th Women Ministers and Parliamentarians Conference in November 2016 in Bangkok, Thailand, where she co-chaired the Drafting Committee for the Statement of Commitment. In this interview, Hon. Ms. Rattle discusses the present situation and challenges of violence against women in the Cook Islands as well as the role of parliamentarians in addressing this issue.

Hon. Ms. Niki Rattle

Speaker of Parliament, Cook Islands



Hon. Ms. Niki Rattle was appointed as Speaker of the Parliament in 2012 and was reappointed in October 2014 following the General Elections. Previously, she has served as the Secretary-General of the Cook Islands Red Cross Society. Hon. Ms. Rattle was also the President of the Cook Islands National Council of Women and the Cook Islands Women’s Counseling Centre. She is the Co-Founder of the Pacific AIDS Foundation and trained as a registered nurse at the Whakatane Hospital in 1970. In 2016, Hon. Ms. Rattle has participated in the AFPPD-NZPPD* Agenda 2030 Workshop for Pacific Parliamentarians in Wellington, New Zealand, and in the 11th Women Ministers and Parliamentarians Conference in Bangkok, Thailand.

*NZPPD: The New Zealand Parliamentarians’ Group on Population and Development is AFPPD’s member National Committee in New Zealand.

1. AFPPD has turned “orange” on this particular day in support of the UNiTE to End Violence against Women global campaign.

Can you comment on the situation of violence against women in the Cook Islands today and how parliamentarians are addressing this issue?

A few years ago, the Ministry of Health has published a national survey² with the Cook Islands National Council of Women on issues related to violence against women and girls. And among the startling results, it was discovered that one in three women have experienced some form of violence in their lifetime. In this area, parliamentarians can play an active part in shaping and passing relevant policies and legislations to put an end to violence against women. I would like to emphasize that it is not enough to “minimize” or to “mitigate” this violence but we have to “stop” it in any form. On the issue of domestic violence, there is also a great concern about the welfare of children in addition to the mothers. Currently, we are in the process of holding public consultations for the Family Law Bill which has provisions related to domestic violence, including physical and emotional abuse, and child protection. In the next sitting of the Parliament, the Select Committee will deliberate the bill. It is my hope that it will pass in the near future.

According to UN Women, there is little reliable data on violence against women in Cook Islands while anecdotal evidence suggests that domestic violence is prevalent but underreported. Do you agree with this statement and how can parliamentarians improve the policy response?

I would have agreed with that statement last year. However, due to the Family Health and Safety Survey, information of the prevalence and frequency of violence against women in the Cook Islands is available, in both the main and outer islands. I am happy to see the success of this survey as well as the concerted efforts in

responding to the findings, particularly from a legislative perspective. As members of parliament, we have a crucial role in supporting and passing bills that protect and assist women and children affected by domestic violence as well as those that address the perpetrators.

The 11th Women Ministers and Parliamentarians Conference has stressed the role of boys and men in addressing violence against women. Has the Cook Islands adopted any policy or strategy, and implemented any program to involve these stakeholders?

Today, a lot more men have come forward to show their support for this cause. Husbands, brothers and fathers have contributed to this growing support, acknowledging that violence in any forms is not right. We have also seen policy changes as well. The Ministry of Education, for example, has revised education laws in 2012 to deal with issues related to teenage pregnancy by improving support for pregnant girls and enforcing fines for truancy. Previously, teenage pregnancy has been a leading contributor to school dropout rates among girls while the boys continue with their education. With the new policy in place, more girls have continued their schooling and this affects the mentality of the boys, and their partners in particular. These changes can then influence the overall thinking of men and boys, and their views towards women and girls as equals.

You were a participant at the former Women Ministers and Parliamentarians Conference in 2014. Can you comment on any follow-up actions by the Parliament of Cook Islands since then?

Since the former conference, I have worked particularly on supporting women parliamentarians in confidence building, and ensuring that women are a part of Select Committees. When there are capacity-building

2. Hon. Niki Rattle referred to the Family Health and Safety Survey, conducted nationally in 2012 – 2013, and published in October 2014.

opportunities such as this conference, I play a part in ensuring that a male and female representative attend. I believe that these little actions can eventually build up into bigger changes. This is important as women leaders can serve as role models who can inspire and encourage other women to come forward. It is my intention to continue with this promotion of women leadership, not only in the Parliament but also in other work areas as well in the country.

In your opinion, how can AFPPD better support parliamentarians to promote gender equality and women's empowerment?

I think AFPPD should continue with organizing these kinds of forums, which gather many representatives of Asia-Pacific countries together to network and exchange ideas. It can be quite isolated in thinking that your problems are yours alone. However, when you come to a place like this and you hear of other countries' challenges and solutions, you can be encouraged and energized. You come to realize that other countries share similar problems as well. We, the Cook Islands, are a member of AFPPD and we would like to support them in advocating for other Pacific island countries to become a member of this parliamentary network. I think you can do so much more when there is this synergy of everybody coming together.