



Inaugural GIRLS Virtual Forum 2021 Outcome Statement

Background

For years, gender inequalities rooted in traditional and religious structures continue to impede girls' progress in Fiji. Fueled by patriarchy, girls' right have not been fully achieved as girls continue to call for a seat on decision making spaces, safer spaces and access to quality education to name a few priorities.

Making up at least 18% of the country's population (ages 0-19), Fijian girls are not spared when it comes to violence and are at a higher risk¹. The Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM) 2020 Sexual Violence against Women and Girls Rape Case Analysis highlights that the average percentage of the victims/survivors of sexual violence under the age of 17 years is 63% for the period between the years 2016-2020².

Consequently, girls continue to face multiple layers of discrimination because of their gender, age, race, religion, socio-economic background, geographical location and disability. They are generally less valued, their voices are unheard, they have more restrictions on their freedom and movement and have limited opportunities to choose their paths in life. Because they are young and female, they are often ignored, neglected and treated as free labor. For these reasons, FWRM is working to change society's attitude towards girls' abilities and potentials.

FWRM has worked with young adolescent girls in Fiji between the ages of 10-12 years since 2003. Over the years, at least 85 adolescent girls have been directly involved in many of the organisation's activities and projects. This has led to the establishment of the FWRM GIRLS (Grow. Inspire. Relate. Lead. Succeed) Programme, a pioneering girls' feminist programme in the Pacific.

¹ Fiji Bureau of Statistics (FBoS), 2017. Population and Housing Census Release 1. Accessed : file:///C:/Users/FWRM/Documents/September%202021/2017_Population_and_Housing_Census_Release_1.pdf

² FWRM, 2020. Accessed : http://www.fwr.org.fj/images/Sexual_Violence_Against_Women_and_Girls_Rape_Case_Analysis_2020_final.pdf

It is crucial that the voices of girls are heard, even more so during crisis situations where pre-existing inequalities are exacerbated, leaving more girls vulnerable. While the country is currently going through the second wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic, it is critical that the voices of young girls are heard throughout Fiji.

The Inaugural Girls Virtual Forum

June 2021 marked a herstoric moment for the FWRM GIRLS programme. The programme organised the Inaugural Girls Virtual Forum, bringing together 50 diverse young girl leaders aged six-17 years from Nadi, Nausori and Kadavu for five weeks. The overall purpose of the Forum was to discuss priority issues from a girl child’s perspective, recommend solutions and key actions to take to address the issues raised.

The Forum was facilitated and led by girls from the programme; a girls-led forum by girls for girls. The Forum provided a safe space for girls to share their own stories and experiences, fostering greater self-agency that would in turn establish a girl-led advocacy platform that aims at transforming formal structures that directly impact girls in Fiji.

This outcome statement represents our collective voices. It reflects the lived experiences and realities of young girls in Fiji and we call for urgent action to the following:

1. GIRLS Equal Participation in Decision-Making

We are deeply concerned that the lack of space and empowerment of girls has contributed to the lack of our involvement in decision-makings in schools and within our communities.

We call for more engagement with girls in decision-making processes in schools and within our communities.

Recommendations:

- The GIRLS Forum strongly recommends the inclusion of awareness training and educational campaigns on Girls Rights and gender equality through education as the basis for girls’ empowerment. This will empower us to realise our human rights which will enable us in decision making processes.
- We call for agency-building programs, career guidance and leadership training skills to support girls to participate effectively in leadership positions and promote a healthy transition from education to work from a young age.

2. Safety and Security

We are deeply concerned with the increase of sexual harassment and violence in schools, public transport and within our communities. As access to public amenities and education goes beyond the service, we need to feel safe in these spaces.

Consequently, our parents are being over-protective for not sending us outside for fear of becoming victims of abuse. Together, this creates a general restriction upon girls in our freedom of movement. Our right to safety and security at home is being violated and we are highlighting our concerns to girls' safety specifically on:

- Bullying and Sexual harassment in schools, public places, public transportation and from private vehicles.
- The increase of house break-ins and robberies at home and within our communities.
- Youths not adhering to COVID-19 rules by not wearing a mask and loitering in groups.

Recommendations:

- We call for parents, educational institutions, community leaders, faith based organisation (FBOs), media organisations and government to take proactive measures to address gender inequality, sexual harassment and social norms in all spaces.
- We call for collaboration between government, FBOs and women's rights organisations to address the need for training programs and strict policies on sexual harassment in schools and within our communities. We call for a strict accountability structure so these issues are not ignored.
- We call for relevant community awareness by the mentioned actors to end the culture of victim blaming.
- We call for more female teachers and independent trained counsellors to be recruited in schools with no biased treatment that will enable girls to participate positively.
- We call for a wider consultation in schools to fully raise awareness around the Zero-Bullying Policy with strict enforcement and monitoring by student councils, teachers, counsellors and other relevant authorities.
- We call Community Police efforts to sustain its work with community groups as this will provide safe public transportation experiences for girls, safe homes and public spaces where communities are free from crime and violence.
- We urge the community police efforts to take on a gender perspective in its work
- We call on the community police to work intentionally with young people in disadvantaged communities as the informal settlements around the central division.

3. Quality Education

We recognise that the constant barriers to education are particularly harsh on girls who are disadvantaged by poverty, disability, safety, hygiene, sanitation needs and gender-based violence. Girls' education has been clearly challenged by COVID-19. Given our current context in Fiji, the pandemic has moved girls out of the physical school space. With a greater risk of losing girls' access to education, we now face double the challenge of keeping up with gender roles at home and balancing our school work³.

We identified several barriers which are of concern in relation to our Education:

- The lack of quality and safer steps taken to ensure Education Continuity persists during crisis. Current steps are not disability friendly and do not ensure Inclusive Education is sustained during these times.
- Remote learning is not responsive to the needs of remote, rural, urban and maritime communities in terms of accessing school materials.
- Insufficient resources with no data, not having access to equipment and support provided for ongoing learning with little to no guidance or interaction from teachers.
- Lack of proper hand washing, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) a key public health issue during COVID-19 and menstruation hygiene in schools.
- Lack of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) Education.

Recommendations:

- We call for budgetary allocations to the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts (MEHA) to support and provide different content and resources for rural, remote, urban and maritime students, of all levels of education under the ministry that is disability inclusive.

Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts (MEHA):

- To facilitate holistic and safe measures for Education Continuity during crisis. This should be communicated to parents/carers during Community and Parents Support (CAPS) meeting and school newsletters through-out the school year to ensure parents/carers are well informed on steps to take when a crisis arises.
- All teachers must undergo workshops on how to best support education continuity during crisis. This may include preparing teachers to support digital learning, organising online support services for parents and students and providing real time lessons on virtual meeting platforms while providing other learning packages.

³ FWRM, 2020. Accessed :

http://www.fwrn.org.fj/images/A2J/Assessment_of_Womens_Access_to_Justice_during_COVID_19_Pandemic_FINAL2.pdf

- Ensure all schools are equipped to safely deliver education continuity packages to all students without putting teachers or parents/carers at risk.
- We call for comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) that is age-appropriate at all levels of education. Female teachers should be specifically trained in SRHR for girls.
- We call for inclusive programs and training for all teachers in building respectful relationships to promote positive changes in attitudes and norms that will in turn create a safer school environment; one without bullying.
- We call for scholarships to increase female participation at all levels of education and in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) programs.

4. Access to Information

Our right to information is linked to structural and systematic barriers relating to religious and cultural expectations. We raise issues in terms of accessing information specifically on:

- Ensure girls are consulted when making decisions that directly/indirectly has an impact of girls' lives.
- Involving girls in community information sharing that is friendly and age appropriate for girls
- Age-appropriate Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MOH) COVID-19 updates.
- Age appropriate key messaging on disasters or crisis.
- Girls need to access information in school that is timely, safe and accessible for girls with disability.

Recommendations:

- We call for greater collaboration between parents, teachers, FBOs, traditional leaders and government to facilitate dialogues and consultation for addressing practices and customs that act as barriers to girls' participation in accessing information.
- MEHA to upskill teachers regularly in order to adopt fun, innovative teaching strategies.
- MEHA to have a separate communication dissemination channel/period for children to be able to access child-friendly information that is timely.
- We call for schools to be disability inclusive by implementing sign language classes as part of the curriculum. Working with the Fiji Association of the Deaf, MEHA should develop learning materials for Deaf schools.
- We call for critical information shared during crisis to be child-friendly and part of the MEHA's updates to children. This information should also be shared on mainstream media to ensure no child is left behind.

