

Isikeli Vulavou and Sulivenusi Waqa

In this podcast Isikeli Vulavou and Sulivenusi Waqa from Fiji talk about attending the human rights conference.

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[00:00:00] This recording was made up a second the Asia Pacific Outgames human rights conference held in Wellington, New Zealand in March 2011. [00:00:09] Thank you. Hi, I am Lisa Kelly. And [00:00:14] I am from Fiji. And I am here representing the males empowerment network Fiji, where I am whereby I provide volunteer assistance, particularly technical assistance. And this is a very new organization in Fiji came in Fiji stand stands for males empowerment network Fiji and it is a community based MSM organization that was established in 2008. I actually worked for the United Nations agency back in Fiji. And I'm here in my personal capacity as a volunteer for men Fiji just to say more about men Fiji's just so that you understand the context where I'm coming from, and also the reason I'm here. Men, Fiji was established in 2008 by a group of professionals who work particularly in the area of public health. And it was established because of the recognition of the huge gap in HIV programming for MSM in Fiji. And the focus of this organization has been on HIV programming. And there has been I mean, the Human Rights component of the program has been missing because of the lack of capacity within the network of professionals, who are also the management collective for men, Fiji, so we thought that this conference was a golden opportunity for us to build our capacity around human rights, and also learn more about what's happening around the Asia Pacific region. And we have gained a lot that we will take back with us. And hopefully, we will be able to apply that in our programming. And more importantly, secure funding for the human rights aspect of our programs. [00:02:24] is funding a difficult issue.

[00:02:26] Yes, we have not been able, there are not many funding opportunities available in Fiji for human rights programs. And more. So because of the I'm sure you're aware of the current military government that is running Fiji. And the there is no National Human Rights Institute right now that is actively sort of addressing human rights abuses and issues that have been happening back in Fiji. And we used to have one, I think Fiji was the first country that established a Human Rights Commission in the islands. And [00:03:19] since the military coup, they have sort of [00:03:24] decommissioned that office. But now they still running but they're just like, administrative stuff. I'm not sure I don't handle [00:03:31] complaints anymore. I know. [00:03:35] They there is no. [00:03:38] I mean, what they used to do before it's not happening now, [00:03:41] you know, functioning like this supposed to be a Human Rights Commission where people can largely complaining for human rights abuses and all that, and for them to speak out on human rights abuses in the country. And obviously, I know they've

been silenced by the current political situation in Fiji, the military rule. And yeah, that's really sad, which means that the LGBT communities work is more than we have to push more in our country. And I'm sure as well as other Pacific allied countries.

[00:04:08] Surprisingly, one good thing that has come out of this government is the decriminalization of homosexuality. And I'm not sure where that emanated from, because we I mean, I was not aware of any intensive lobbying being done. And most of the decrees that are coming up now, some of them they have had substantive and comprehensive consultations with the communities before they are decreed and the Penal Code. I mean, it used to be the Penal Code notes, the criminal decree, crimes decree, sorry. So I'm not too sure about the consultations that happened around that friends degree. But one of the games that the LGBT community had, I mean, games from this government is the decriminalization of homosexuality. So that was one of the positive thing that I thought this government has done for the community. I mean, at large, [00:05:06] do you know where that came from with it decriminalization push came from, [00:05:11] they have been doing that in the past with elected governments. But when the military came into power, everyone stood silent, even the non government organizations in Fiji, but out of the blue, the government, just [00:05:27] to [00:05:29] remove a lot of the sodomy acts from Fiji and abrogated the constitution and came up with this human rights decree, protecting the rights of sexual minorities in the country. And we were like, okay, we love it. But it's really, you know, the process they've taken, it's not really democratic. But somehow, the our, the we, they've interesting, the address some of the issues that were most sensitive issues [00:05:55] that would have been received a lot of resistance. If there was a democratic government, the government, [00:06:01] if they have ever graced the Constitution, the first institution that would stand up in Fiji and oppose this and have a march on the street will be the church, the Methodist Church, but because of the government, the military, they can do that. [00:06:17] Which is a good thing for LGBT community. And [00:06:21] we live probably because in the 1997 constitution, under which democratic governments have been operating, there was a clause on I'm not so sure about this, which section in particular?

Well, there was reference to [00:06:44] Fiji became the second [00:06:45] discrimination laws for people from different ethnic backgrounds, racial backgrounds, including sexual orientation. So that was the big plus in the 2000. It was the 1980s seven [00:07:00] constitution. I think he became the second country in the world to have [00:07:04] the clause that protects [00:07:06] the rights of people with different sexual preference. And that was a big move for flinching. I don't know, it's just weird how things have been going in the past them, you know, [00:07:20] it's just [00:07:22] an even under the democratic government, and we had that clause in the Constitution. And then we had, I mean, this actually came up prominently when they the Thomas McCusker and Kate, yeah, case, whereby an Australian tourist had, have had sex with a local. [00:07:47] And it was taken to the High Court in the High Court. [00:07:52] I mean, they had convicted him in the epilogue, what Magistrates Court, and then it was taken up to the High Court, where they had sort of dismissed the case. Because, I mean, they were not guilty, because the judges had made reference to that particular clause of the Constitution. And there was widespread resistance from the religious community, particularly the Methodist Church. So that was done under democratic rule. But now that we are under military rule, they had sort of further rewarded as by removing the sodomy statutes from the former penal code, which is now the claims decree. And we now can, I mean, now they allow homosexuality, but in the privacy of your homes, you cannot do it publicly, which is however, [00:08:50] however, on the other side, the sad thing about the all of these and the decriminalisation and everything. They've also impose tough penalties on sex work and and to ask that was like, you know, you've decriminalized

this and then we trying to remove penalties on sex works, sex workers in Fiji, and now the military. So [00:09:12] I had to be a prostitution is still a crime.

Unfortunately, also, they have made advanced in some areas. I mean, when it comes to homosexuality, they still feel that prostitution is it's still a criminal act. So there has been a lot of work done in trying to address that, particularly because of HIV and AIDS programs. And it's that angle that NGOs and UN agencies and regional agencies in Fiji have been trying to use to try and decriminalize prostitution, and because of the increasing evidence that it will just for the stigmatize the community, they will go underground. And then of course, HIV will continue to spread, if they don't access the services, because of the because of the context, you know, the legal context, not providing not supportive enough for them to access the services that they will need. [00:10:19] Yeah, sorry, following the decriminalization of homosexuality in Fiji, there were a few other acts that came into fourth, protecting the rights of sexual minorities. One would be the employment problem, publication act, that restrict people from discriminating you on the ground, at the workplace, on grounds of sexual orientation, which is basically you cannot be fired if you're gay. [00:10:44] And they cannot discriminate you from getting to a high level. I mean, maybe a high civil servant position if you're gay. I mean, we've now have that anti discrimination laws a in depth Employment Relations bill. Sorry. So there's a lot of progress that has been made under the current military rule. And I must say that we still surprised about the the decriminalization of homosexuality, because the lobbying for that has been done long time ago. But it was only reflected in the Constitution. But our penal code was archaic. It I think it was in existence for about more than 40 years or so you know, when British rule was first came to Fiji. [00:11:40] So I'm sure they probably just [00:11:45] because of the current Attorney General, a is probably quite supportive and understanding to of the, you know, the latest trend, when it also comes to those one sexuality. So they have been accommodating in that particular area, but we still need them to strengthen the services, the Human Rights services that the government or a National Human Rights Institute should provide to those who may still face discrimination given a stay at their workplace or anywhere.

[00:12:20] But you were saying earlier that, even though it's been decriminalized, that some that there would be in private, so you would you have hassles if you were walking down the street or overtly homosexual, [00:12:32] publicly, of course, even though decriminalization [00:12:37] took place this deal reports of, I mean, unreported cases of LGBT community, the rest of the street, there has been deaths in the past as well. [00:12:49] Really, really bad. We have [00:12:52] had instances in the past, I think, in the last year, or 2009, one of our I mean, a fellow, a gay, a gay guy, who works as a hairdresser, was murdered by young kids in his own neighborhood. It was reported in the media that he was returning from work at night, and these guys were probably drinking something and then they started hassling him. And they ended up killing him. So because of the absence of the Nash of human rights Institute, there was no way of addressing that particular issue that it could be a hate, I mean, it's most apparent that it is a hate crime. And, and, unfortunately, we are sort of helpless, in that regard, because of the absence of a mechanism or an active Institute, National Human Rights Institute where we could channel our concerns to address that particular issue. And I'm not sure even by now, where whether those guys are behind bars or what's happened to them, like no one has been able to take that up. No organization either has been able to take that up. And it was also probably because of the absence of NGOs, that works [00:14:29] with [00:14:31] the LGBT I community in terms of human rights, because men Fiji, when it came, like I said earlier, the focus has been primarily on HIV programming. But now we're starting to realize that even in HIV programming, you need to address also human rights issues. So that had also sort of changed our mindset, that we cannot avoid human rights, whatever the issues are, we have to also include that in our programs. And hopefully, we will

receive funding that would enable us to strengthen the Human Rights component of our program, which right now is absent. I mean, there's nothing really [00:15:20] the network that you're a part of how many people are involved in that? [00:15:25]

Well, in the management, it has evolved over time, we had so many in the beginning. And then we ourselves because we had the capacity within the organization to organize ourselves ever like to develop and strengthen the organization. So we started with about 20, management collective members. And then over time, we had decreased it to seven. So that management decisions are more done in a more systematic and strategic manner, then having so many people on board, but otherwise, those guys are still members of the organization. And we have also been having membership drives, on Facebook. And also on the ground, we've been going to, I mean, whichever events or activities we organize around the country, we've also tagged membership drives to the to those activities. And we are having our annual first ever Annual General Meeting in either in April or May, whereby we will also use it as a membership drive. And also we will call on our members who have registered already to be part of the Annual General Meeting. As part of our effort towards registering men, Fiji, is an official charitable organization in Fiji. [00:16:55] What kind of activities do you undertake, [00:17:00] due to limited funding, our activities has mostly been event based campaigns where we develop behavior change communication, products, materials, such as post water bottles, just like those that have been developed for this particular conference, with the specific messages on them promote, particularly promoting condom use. And what are the activity [00:17:33] activity itself that we teach every man Well, I just took the position this year. Well, I'm still new to that, like skill set I sit in as a member of the management collective for men Fiji, as the chair of the activity subcommittee. On the other hand, I also coordinate the Fiji transgender empowerment project under the Fiji Arts Council. And one of our major activities for the for the project is the anti cynical page. Its features biggest animal drag show it's held every year during high viscous. hibiscus is the premier festival of us in Fiji. It's the biggest festival in Fiji. So understanding how is probably the biggest event, one of the biggest events in the [00:18:18] high discuss festival itself. So it's a crowd draw.

[00:18:23] More people come and watch the drag show than any other hype is because events are featuring the Queen's themselves. [00:18:31] That's one of my main, one of the main main activities. I coordinate. I was the event coordinator for them here and this year, and we've got funding from you in a specific office. And yes, one of the objectives that I'm involved in is with the citizens constitutional forum. We are doing a story on human rights abuse story, which happened way back in 2002. When I gave student nice school was bitten by 16 year prefect's for being a game. This young person took the meta to court through the Human Rights Commission and the six prefect's was sentenced to well, they would have to go through anger management and all that, because they will mind that they couldn't go to jail, I was hoping that they would go to jail. Well, and, yes, I'm really looking forward to these outcomes conference because I want to learn more about human rights, LGBT human rights issues in the Pacific, and [00:19:34] what [00:19:37] what strategies are there [00:19:40] that will enable us to effectively address human rights abuses in our country, not only address human rights abuses, but also promote human rights amongst our members. Because when it comes to human rights in back in Fiji, like our members, the LGBT, they can be quite hesitant. We have that, in fact, that was the reason when Fiji, when we first establishment, which we thought we will focus on HIV programming, it will attract more of our members to the program, rather, because when it comes to human rights, LGBT communities, they still need to be empowered to embrace human rights program, and you know, they their own human rights, rather than just going with the flow, which has been existence from way before. So we need to go against the flow.

I mean, there are many things good that are happening. But there are other things also that we need to address. So we hope that that is the civil rights component of the program, we will be a I mean, and with funding with the appropriate funding, we will be able to raise the profile of the human rights program within the men features programs, and empower the community by educating them on their own rights can also provide a channel whereby they can approach appropriate services to air their grievances, or concerns or complaints even as simple as verbal, verbal abuse, I mean, because we need to keep record of these things. And a lot of this is happening a verbal abuse on the streets, or in school, or even bullying in schools. And even like, in certain cases, we have had deaths, it has proved it has even gone that far, resulting in fatal deaths. So [00:21:50] we hope this will improve as we [00:21:55] increase the profile of the human rights program. And also by the management collective of themselves, also increasing their own capacity in human on human rights. [00:22:07] We would also love to see an increase of Pacific representations in Asia Pacific forums and conferences like this, and and we're grateful to the Netherland government for reading funding for that, but I still think that there is still a gap in terms of representation from the Pacific, it is clear that this conference, I have noticed that this conference, it's all it's mostly a far, far Fini and the latest, you know, in some more internal, this not representation we these representation from from Fiji, Melanie shirts, but [00:22:42] what about [00:22:44] the focus is Polynesian and that is true.

There has been incredible work done by other melon nations and Micronesians LGBT movements out there that needs to be documented that needs to be, you know, share in these kind of conferences. And, you know, that's, that's still a gap in terms of Pacific representation. And I, and I hope that in the future, probably the third and other future events of Asia Pacific that that Pacific representation is, is there, meaning every from every corner of the Pacific and much as the Polynesia [00:23:24] and I'm really happy that the Outgames has provided this opportunity for us, because otherwise most of grievances on human rights is channel through the HIV regional conferences, we have never had any human rights regional conference. So this was a great opportunity for us to come and learn about human rights what what's happening in other countries in the Asia Pacific region, and also gained from it. And we even as we are here, we are already thinking about how we can go back. And I mean, apply whatever knowledge we have learned from here to try and raise the profile of our programs in back in Fiji. Apart from the activities that men Fiji and the transgender empowerment project is doing. There's also the research that men is was messages priority this year. So we have secured funding from the Pacific response Fund, which is mainly funded by us aid and New Zealand eight.

[00:24:39] And we are using those funds for [00:24:44] for the implementation of an integrated behavioral and biological survey. So we're hoping that the results from the survey it's particularly on HIV and STI, that the results from that particular research will enable us to [00:25:06] develop [00:25:09] program, it will inform our program, it will also help us in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of our HIV programs. So maybe in the future, if we secure more funding will be able to also carry out a survey with a quantitative or qualitative for human rights, you know, to just explore what human rights issues are there amongst the LGBT community in Fiji. [00:25:38] And I think the survey is probably a landmark for our community and as well as in the Pacific because the first serve in integrity, integrated by her behavior, biological survey that is done in the Pacific Islands, and specifically on MSM in tg. So this is really interesting. Oh, [00:25:58] it's fiction. [00:26:00] I'm really looking forward to the results and the outcomes of the survey in July, which when it's going to be available for the public. [00:26:07] So we're going to hope maybe in the next conference, we will be able to share some of the results from that survey. And also we would like to add that is another organizations and Fiji. It's a survival Advocacy Network, which is mainly made made up of it's a sex worker network, mostly transgender sex workers. So they've been also doing good work amongst the

transgender sex workers in Fiji. So we have existing organizations that can reach out to the community are there, but we just need more funding.

[00:26:46] So what are the the biggest things that you will take away from this conference? What are the what are the things that stick in your mind? [00:26:53] Well, for me, personally, the Yogyakarta principal, I attended that session. So I am, like, I'm already thinking in my head. Now, we are going to use this document as a guiding document for us as we develop the Human Rights component of our program, because of the richness of the information in that particular booklet, the educator principle, and also they have an activist guide. So that should also I mean, I'm already thinking ahead and thinking, I have to get hold of those documents. And we're going to use that document to help to help in inform us on what strategies and what programs we can develop to address the human rights issues that are prevalent in our country. And I had also gone to I'm also quite interested in how we can [00:27:55] sort of [00:27:57] instill a town Lawrence, like for me, maybe we could start with tolerance. Like how could we increase tolerance amongst those who are not LGBT I who don't belong to our community? Does I believe that for most of the countries, it has been tolerance, I like the best a headset for the for Netherlands. Its tolerance and that has made them live through I mean, LGBT community that has enabled the LGBT community to live in them, what do I mean, it has been called Yo, the relationship between the LGBT community and the the other community. So that's one of the I mean, one of the things I'm thinking maybe we should, even if we work with churches, it's not about accepting, I mean, it is probably they can accept them, that's better.

But if we work with the churches, we can just ask them probably when you have your sermons, you minister tolerance, I mean, focus on tolerance for any type of I mean, especially for this type of behavior. And maybe, I mean, for not for the tip of the iceberg for the LGBT icon for those who they seem to them are different from them. So tolerance for that, for the differences that I exist into now, communities, and also, I've also attended the sessions on queer education, in schools, I think that is very important that we educate the young ones as they're growing up, talking about tolerance to them, and also them recognizing the differences that are prevalent in our communities in terms of sexual identities. So it is important that we also work through the schools. So that's why that's, I think, the two things for me, that I will take back, I've been trying to work with organizations that are with the Ministry of Education, and also regional organization that has sexuality education programs in schools, to try and work with us, and help develop the resources, and also probably help develop the capacity, especially the teachers have developed the capacity around how they can teach sexuality, and issues around homosexuality and the different sexual identities in the schools, because these are our future. And they would, I mean, if we talk about these to them now, when they grow up, they will be could be like Netherlands, and I'm sure the Netherlands has reached this point, because they have done it very early, earlier in the mass in most other countries.

So, of course, [00:30:57] well, for me, these conferences, pushed me further to do more work on LGBT and human rights in my country, and to also continue the work that I'm currently doing. [00:31:11] And [00:31:13] yes, and I think that the LGBT community, GG, are doing a great job. And this is evidence as we are the first Pacific island country to have endorsed the UN joint statement, I think that's a plus plus for our community and feature have pushed our government and our minister in the states to endorse this. And I think it's our communities quite powerful and the work that we do, and we just need to get the support from our neighbors, Australia, New Zealand. And yes, at the national [00:31:44] level, we need to coordinate the work that we do, or because for now, our focus is just primarily MSM. But in this conference, we've also learned about lesbians, and we know the lesbian community back in Fiji is quite underground, they're not as vocal as us. So it's also sort of

empowered us and also enable us to open our mind to also start thinking about how we can involve the other the L the B, the T, the end of the be, I'm not sure if we have intersects the ABC HTC been in the bisexuals in Fiji, how we can involve them more effectively in our programs. And also, like he has mentioned about the Pacific representation here. Most of the emphasis is seems to be on the Polynesian countries. So one of the things that I had discussed with the jury from Todd is for us to organize the Pacific Cockers today. So that is also one of the things that we I mean, we are already moving. With the because of this conference, we are also using this as an opportunity for us to discuss at the regional level, how we can sort of collaborate further and also work in a more coordinated manner, also strengthen the capacity of the regional Pacific sexual diversity network. Because

Currently, I'm not so sure about what they're doing. But we could all contribute to building the capacity of that particular regional network and also involving the lesbians, bisexuals, more in the discussions in sex workers with the transgender sex workers, they are involved, but we should involve them more in our programs. [00:33:34] One very quick last question. If somebody was listening to this in 50 years time, what would you say to them? [00:33:41] Well, I will, hopefully, I hope that my in 30 years, we will not be having specific conferences like this, where we still have marginalized, we still have marginalized communities, minority communities, I hope that by then every it's a utopian society whereby we had sort of [00:34:08] fully integrated, [00:34:08] I mean, the different communities based on sexual identities that are in the community, have integrated well amongst themselves and also with the Give me the majority population. [00:34:24] 30 years time, I'll be the first tg Prime Minister for Fiji. [00:34:30] And we would be the first country in the Pacific Island to legalize gay marriage. [00:34:36] living peacefully and [00:34:39] harmoniously. I hope that by the time we would be everyone would be living peacefully and it would be more peaceful than it is now. And then there is no hostilities between the different communities, particularly on sexual identities in the next 30 years. So embrace your sexuality and your identity. [00:35:05] It's who you are.

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