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GOVERNMENT OF SAMOA

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Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development

DIVISION FOR WOMEN

Men against Violence Advocacy Group **(MAVA)**

Men Take Aim at Domestic Violence - An International Women's Day Initiative
2010

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International Women's Day

March 8th of every year is designated by the United Nations General Assembly as International Women's Day. It is a day to celebrate the achievements of women when the socialist movements in North America & Europe started agitating for better working conditions for women. Later, the movement would grow to fight for a whole range of political, economic & social rights that had denied for women up to that

point. International Women's Day is celebrated globally today, with the United Nations making empowerment of women, a central part of struggle for economic & social development everywhere.

Chief Executive Officer of the Ministry of Women, Community & Social Development, Leituala Kuiniselani Toelupe Tago says the theme for this year's celebrations is '*Equal Rights, Equal Opportunities, Progress for All*'. Local non-government community organizations will be commemorating IWD as they see fit, but for the Ministry, the focus will again be on a subject that continues to dominate local news – **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**.

Domestic Violence

Domestic Violence was also the focal point of last year's IWD commemoration in Samoa. The reason being is the alarming increase in serious cases of domestic violence being reported to the Police & to community groups such as Mapusaga o Aiga & Samoa Victim Support Group. This year, the Ministry will work together again with the Men against Violence Advocacy Group to highlight Domestic Violence, & more significantly to mobilize the support of men themselves to combat it.

“Engaging men as a group to combat domestic violence is a somewhat novel idea although men have always been involved as individuals in anti-violence campaigns,” Leituala elaborates. But men have a special part to play in the issue. Firstly available evidence suggests that only does domestic violence exist, but men are the main perpetrators.

A comprehensive Samoa Family Health & Safety Study conducted for the Ministry confirmed for example, that physical violence & abuse against women & children is very much a part of the Samoan domestic scene. Some 40% of the women that participated in the survey say that they have been subjected to physical abuse & violence at one time or another mostly at the hands & fists of their husband or partner.

“The profiles of the participants & their spouses would show that violence occurs at all levels of society & not only with any one group. Low education levels & alcohol consumption were consistent with the prevalence of domestic violence, but domestic violence happens at every level of Samoan society,” says Leituala.

Attitudes towards Violence

The survey findings in Samoa were also consistent with results in other countries where men & women had been socialized in their communities to believe that men have the right to discipline their spouses by physical means, & apparently a large number of victims commented that they did not report these events or seek help because they thought it was normal to be beaten. Disobedience to their husbands was a primary reason given by many women for being beaten.

Leituala responds that physical abuse against women is anything but normal. No person (male / female) can reach their full potential if oppressed by any form of abuse. Besides, domestic abuse is a violation of people's human rights, protected by Samoa's law & Constitution. Domestic abuse also generates a high tolerance level of violence that manifests itself in other destructive ways. Only a few weeks ago, a woman is reported to have died in Saleimoa – Uta after being beaten by her husband.

There have been other similar tragic incidences. But that is only a small part of the daily violence that plagues the Samoan home, including the alarmingly high incidence of sexual violations of young girls & women that is coming to light. The Mapusaga o Aiga women's refuge organization, the Samoa Victim Support Group & other community & church based organizations bear witness to the extent of the damage & the human carnage that results from all this.

Violence against women is in fact classified as an act of "Discrimination against Women" by the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) & as a signatory to the convention, the Government of Samoa is obligated to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women including gender based violence.

The Men against Violence Advocacy Group

Meeting those obligations is one of the reasons the Ministry started engaging men to take the lead in striking out violence within the Samoan home. The result of that engagement is the formation of the Men against Violence Advocacy Group. Membership of the group is open to all interested males but to begin with, has been drawn mainly from Pulenu'u. These are Matai, & in most cases senior Matai & leaders of their communities.

"As Matai & heads of families & communities, what other group is there in Samoa with similar power & clout to root out the problem?" says Leituala. "For a long time now, women have been at the forefront of the struggle against gender based violence. We think it is time to bring to bear on the subject as well, the strengths of our traditions & cultural practices such as the power & respect accorded to our traditional leaders & elders. These leaders as we know are mostly men although more & more women are also taking over traditional leadership positions. Only recently, the international community has begun engaging men in the struggle, but with the establishment of MAVA last year, Samoa is probably ahead of most countries in this regard."

To coincide with International Women's Day this year, MAVA has undertaken a series of seminars with the Pulenu'u of Upolu & Savaii to mobilize them as a group against domestic violence. Meetings with village fono on Upolu & Savaii have also been held in order for traditional leadership to become more actively engaged in combating domestic violence in their communities. Television, radio & the print media have similarly been utilized to mark International Women's Day & to promote the group's agenda on combating domestic violence.

“We at the Ministry of Women, Community & Social Development are very excited with the idea of men taking an active part in the struggle against violence,” Leituala comments. “The Ministry will give every support it can to the new group during its formative period, but the idea is for the group to pursue its own goals & determine its direction as an organization. This is a big step forward in the fight against gender based violence. It is good news for the work of the Ministry, for meeting Samoa’s treaty obligations, & more importantly for the safety of the women & children of Samoa.”



Villagers of Toamua during the MAVA group’s Community Outreach Advocacy Program for the commemoration of International Women’s Day 2010



Untitled men (Aumaga) sitting outside the Fale Tali Malo during MAVA’s program.



MAVA Chairperson Afamasaga Toleafoa Fa'amatala during his presentation. The Chair was assisted by MAVA members, Lefau Soonalole, & Letelema'ana Tiai'ina.



The men, women & children of Toamua during MAVA's program.



Members of MAVA awaiting the commencement of the Samoa Victim Support Group Campaign against Rape March 2010



The Men against Violence Advocacy Group take the lead during the SVSG March



"LEADING BY EXAMPLE" – the advocates of eliminating violence from within the family march on in front of other participating schools, organizations & Ministries.