

Speech by Kamala - Women in Leadership Summit

The respected Board Members DAKSHINA INDIA ANDHRA SANGAM OF FIJI, Mrs SANGEETA RAJU, President, Mrs, Naleen Naicker , Vice President, Ms NEHA SINGH, SECRETARY, Ms ROHINI LATA, TREASURER, Andhra Sangam NAARI SANGH, and the excellent and capable organizers of this Leadership Seminar, Distinguished Guests, honoured Ladies and Gentlemen,

Kaalai vanakkam (Good morning) Vanakkam means ‘bowing down to your soul’
It is my intense pleasure to join you all at the **NAARI SANGH** Leadership Seminar this morning. This is a valuable opportunity for us to exchange ideas on strengthening women leadership. My talk today concentrates on Women are winners.

We celebrated 143 years of Girmit remembrance this year, marking 52 years of independence. We have come a long way as a nation, and this is a good time to take stock of the progress women have made in leadership, and consider how we can build on it in the years to come.

Leadership begins with an educated mind. It is recognised that women form half of our human capital, so when it came to giving quality education, it was regardless of gender. Over the years women in the world have made huge strides in education. In 1965, only 43% of women were literate. This figure is almost doubled to 82.7% in 2022. Under our meritocratic school system, our girls fared just as well and sometimes even better than the boys, and the gender gap in universities has closed. Five decades ago, only a quarter of the students going into university were women. Today, we make up slightly more than half of the

enrolment cohort, 68.4% to be exact. Women are contributing more in the labour force. The female labour force participation rate (for women aged 15 and above) has jumped to 33.3% in 2022. Not only are there more women in our labour force, there are also more women holding professional jobs. In Fiji, over the past decade, the percentage of female lawyers admitted to the Bar rose up by 80%. Fiji Law Society president Laurel Vaurasi revealed this in March. Despite the progress that women have made in the labour force, there remain significant areas where we are under-represented, particularly at the apex of companies. ONLY 10 per cent of the CEO positions in Fiji are held by women, says Education Minister Honourable Premila Kumar. Mrs Kumar has encouraged capable women to take the challenge of heading organisations.

“If you look at the statistics, 10 per cent women hold CEO positions in Fiji,” she said. “That means 90 per cent are men who are heading organisations. “That means when we talk about gender equality, we have not achieved that. “And similar statistics are there if you take into consideration of board members. In Fiji, 20 per cent women are represented on boards; that means 80 per cent are still men. “So, there is no gender balance there as well.”

Honourable Kumar said women could bring in interpersonal skills such as listening, empathy and collaboration. “All these skills are needed. Tough approach, violent approach or aggressive approach will not give you that result. So women bring in different sets of skills to the table and that is why we would like to see that more women are presented in boards as well as they become CEOs. Minister for Education Premila Kumar during the Central Suva Arya Samaj International Women’s Day celebration in Samabula, Suva yesterday. Picture: JONACANI LALAKOBAU

Honourable Kumar says 69% of teachers are women but only 27% of them hold leadership positions. Minister says in the past, teachers were appointed for heads of schools' positions by the unions and Ministry of Education. This suggests that there is clearly much headroom for women at the top. The value of women in leadership Prioritising diversity in leadership is not about achieving an 'optical balance'. It is about tapping on the full breadth and depth of talent available and equipping companies with diverse talents and viewpoints so that they can better navigate and address challenges in a more complex and competitive global environment.

Women leaders bring with them a unique set of leadership strengths, enhancing the ability of the leadership team to navigate challenges. A Harvard Business Review study published in 2013 found that 57% of male directors thought that women brought fresh perspectives and diversity of thought. Another study found that female directors were more likely to take the interests of multiple stakeholders into account, and to understand the reasoning of others, before arriving at a decision. According to research by McKinsey, female leaders are also more likely to exhibit behaviours such as building respect within their teams, inspiring optimism toward the company's/organization's vision, and investing in people development.

Unlocking potential by placing emphasis on cultivating female leaders A progressive and future-oriented society is one which provides access to opportunities for all, and maximises the potential of all talent, men and women. Achieving greater diversity requires concerted effort by companies and organisations to redesign processes to be gender friendly, and to prioritise diversity.

There are three key areas that I would like to offer: First, gender-friendly leadership selection and development processes need to be put in place. Second, build more family-friendly workplaces. Many women, like men, aspire to have meaningful careers and a fulfilling family life at the same time. Younger fathers today increasingly see themselves playing a larger role at home, just as women are stepping up to take on more responsibilities in the workplace. It is also a smart business move which improves staff retention and productivity. Third, place emphasis on achieving gender diversity in workplace leadership. As a society, we must expect companies/institutions/organizations to do more to improve their gender diversity.

We are all aware of great women leaders in Fiji and the world at present time. But today, I shall take you to the cries of three indentured women who were winners and leaders in their own way. So, let me take you all to the time of indenture system, which began in 1874 and lasted till 1916 and was abolished in 1920. and learn about the struggles of indentured women. The first woman to listen to is Kunti.

On 10 April 1913, Kunti, a female Indian indentured labourer, was directed alone to weed an inaccessible banana patch at Nadewa in Rewa, Fiji. Compulsory isolation was a common and very operative technique to deal with unruly workers. Kunti was being disciplined for her supposedly petulant conduct and for giving the plantation management a great deal of trouble. Later that afternoon, Overseer Cobcroft came on his normal round of review, caught hold of Kunti and made 'improper suggestions to her'. Kunti shrieked, wriggled herself free from Cobcroft, ran in the direction of the Wainibokasi River, a little distance away, and flung herself into the water. Kunti told the world she was saved from drowning by Jagdeo, a boy who chanced to be in a dinghy close by.

Her story was in mass-circulating Indian newspapers, the *Bharat Mitra* and the *Allahabad Leader*/and sparked off an unprecedentedly strong movement to stop the migration of Indian indentured labour altogether. According to historian, K.L. Gillion, the move to stop the humiliation of Indian women on colonial plantations enticed more backing among the Indian masses, than any other movement in modern Indian history. more even than the movement for independence. Although of lowly cobbler caste, Kunti was praised by the still caste- mindful Indian press for her courageousness, endurance and strength of mind, and her name amalgamated with the 'list of honourable and brave ladies' in Indian history. Kunti's story was printed at a time of rising tension in India itself against the indenture system.

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On 1 August 1913, *Bharat Mitra*, a Hindi daily printed from Calcutta, contained a story titled 'The wails of a woman'. The article was an individual description of an Indian indentured woman labourer in Fiji, by the name Kunti, who had been subjected to sexual mistreatment and several other types of prejudices. In the story, Kunti is talking about her destiny stated:

Reader, I am twenty years old now and have two daughters, one of whom is aged three and the other only one year. Alone my husband is unable to face or stand in the way of the overseer or the Sardar. Now I am prepared to kill myself by drowning, giving up all love of the world, of my daughters and my husband, if my chastity is ever violated and I ask my Indian sisters never to commit the mistake of coming to this side or their condition too will be as miserable as mine. I pray also to the leaders of the country to put a stop to this bad system and earn the great merit of

protecting helpless women from oppression by saving them from the miseries caused by the contract.

(Sd., I, Kunti, have given the impression of my right-hand thumb).

In the end, the *Bharat Mitra* extravagantly acclaimed Kunti for her courage and resilient will. The *Bharat Mitra* in its plea to the British government, also opened the superior issue, holding that 'it would be impossible to get on without putting an end to the indenture system'.

Kunti's case is but one of the few brought to light' (1913). Kunti's history kindled emotions in India, and the Anti-Indenture Emigration League which had its head office in Calcutta brought up the issue with the Governments of Bengal of India. Several Indian personalities, renowned amongst whom were men like Tej Bahadur Sapu, penned effectively to the Government of the United Provinces to perform an independent investigation into the accusations put together by Kunti.

Nonetheless, the prominence that was given to persecuted women like Kunti gave the activists and nationalists a strong moral opening to denounce colonial rule. Kunti had won at last.

Two other indentured women who shared Kunti's courage and resilient spirit were Sukhrania and Naraini.

Sukhrania lived with, Lachminarain. Rup Singh, had this to say about Sukhrania: 'I know Sukhrania. She was a prostitute. Anybody who went to her and paid her money, she would lend herself to'. For Sukhrania, the act of giving herself to a man or marketing her sexual labour time involved choosing between sexual

labour and plantation labour. As she decided for the former, she made a significant choice about the precise fashion in which her body would be commoditized for money. This choice challenged the patriarchal assumption that women should be pure among a multitude of other qualities. Sukhrania also disputed other stereotypical womanly qualities such as conformity and submission. For instance, when Lachminarain reprimanded her for not heeding to him, she responded: 'You are nothing to me. I can do as I like and please myself'. In this way, Sukhrania's self-assuredness and self-ruling, especially sexually self-directed nature juxtaposed directly with Lachminarain's (patriarchal) notions of lady likeness and obedience.

Lachminarain's craving to exclusively own Sukhrania (physically, mentally, socially and sexually)—a patriarchal aspiration—was intensified by his rank as an indentured, coloured, labourer. In patriarchal terms, Sukhrania was the only 'property/commodity' Lachminarain could credibly 'own'. When she declined to let him influence her, Lachminarain's manliness was questioned. Sukhrania's story is retold here because it raised certain significant topics about prostitution, choice and possession of the female body in Fiji in the early 1900s.

Naraini

Upon learning she was expecting, eighteen-year-old Naraini entered the ship *S.S. Santhia* bound for Fiji in 1910. During the voyage, she dated a shipmate whom she later wedded in Fiji. Naraini's husband was violent towards her: 'In the *girmit* lines, indenture barrack, he deprived her of nourishment and beat her'. Then on 16 August 1910, she gave birth to a premature child. Four days later, her child died. The medical report stated that the child had been crushed by a

door but Naraini maintained that the child had been killed by her husband when he discovered that it was not his. Some six days after she had given birth, a European over-seer, Bloomfield, said that Naraini should go to work even though according to the laws at the time, a woman was not permitted to work for three months after she had given birth to a child. It was said that Naraini challenged Bloomfield as she retorted: 'My child is dead. I will not go to work'. When he heard this, Bloomfield beat her so severely that she became unconscious and fell. He was arrested and the case reached the Supreme Court in Suva City. Unsurprisingly, Bloomfield was found not guilty by the Supreme Court and was freed. Naraini, however, was beaten so badly she sustained brain damage.

Although she was physically and psychologically abused by two different men, Naraini's story, in particular her refusal to work after the birth of her child, may be perceived as an attempt to confront a colonial patriarchy. In particular, she is remembered for the epiphanic moment when she refused to become the victim of another man, in this instance, a European man. Although she is beaten for this, her attempt to stand up to a man was extremely courageous, considering the harsh realities of indenture.

Amongst other issues, Naraini's ordeal in Fiji in 1910 raised concerns about the simultaneous abuse of indentured women in the home (domestic sphere/indentured barracks) by Indian indentured men and in the work environment (public domain/sugar plantations) by European men. It also exposed the failure of the colonial patriarchal legal system when prominent (white) males (in this case, Bloomfield) perpetrated crimes against indentured women. Two other issues raised here are a woman's right to maternity or

bereavement leave after the birth/death of a child and the abuse and murder of infants during the indenture period.

Indentured Indian woman, Naraini, is denied justice after she is severely beaten by overseer, Harold Bloomfield, when she refuses to go back to work after giving birth and losing her baby on a Colonial Sugar refining Company of Australia owned sugarcane estate in Fiji in 1910.

The whole incident leaves Bloomfield relatively unscathed, but for Naraini life is never the same again. Oral evidence suggests that she became mentally deranged. At the time of the trial, some eight months after the assault, she is still seen in the hospital, weak and suffering from dysentery.

Her story had featured prominently in the Indian media in India and was picked up and highlighted by Sarojini Naidu. She was prominent member of the Indian National Congress, which was leading a national movement in India to abolish Indian indenture system at the turn of the twentieth century. This system was legally abolished in 1916, and all Indian indenture agreements, including those in Fiji, were abolished in 1920.

Naraini had dared to challenge the injustice and brutality that the indentured Indian women had encountered in the plantation system not only in Fiji but also in all other indenture colonies. Naraini paid a heavy price for her stand. She died in obscurity somewhere in Fiji. Her story however, helped to mobilise millions of Indian women in India and eventually abolish the dreadful system of human trafficking of young Indian men, women, and children.

But even if there might have been some other viable reasons behind the empire's decision finally to abolish the indenture system (1916), many believed that it was the protest of the women against their exploitation that gave momentum to the movement against indenture.

In closing, I encourage all of us to continue to champion and prioritise leadership diversity. Greater diversity enables our companies and organisations to be more adaptive, and our society to be more progressive. We have made good progress in our 50-year history, and the best years lie ahead. I am certain that our efforts to promote female leadership will build a strong foundation for the generations of women leaders to come.

Thank you.