



Speech by

Fiona Simpson

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PARLIAMENTARY AMNESTY GROUP: WHITE RIBBON DAY

Miss SIMPSON (Maroochydore—NPA) (4.07 p.m.): I rise to second this motion and to acknowledge that International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women is an important day. This is an important motion. I recognise that this is an issue that has the support, obviously, of both men and women in this parliament. I recognise that this is a basic issue of safety in communities. Often the most vulnerable people in our communities can be women and, unfortunately, the power issues have meant that there has been a history of domestic violence in many countries. When it comes to countries where there has been war, that power imbalance is even more extreme. Certainly, we are also recognising the particular situation in the Solomon Islands. This parliament is bringing some focus to bear upon that particular issue, as we want to support those people who have suffered through that conflict. We realise that women, in particular, have suffered direct personal traumas, including rape, violence, intimidation and torture associated particularly with the unrest in that country.

Of the 55 women and girls who lived on the western Weathercoast during the conflict, 19 were allegedly raped by occupying forces. One girl was only 11 years old at the time. When the conflict was over, nearly 200 rapes were reported in the first six months of 2004. It goes beyond one's imagination. We can read the figures, but they represent an incredible world of heartache, which does not stop with the incidents that have occurred to these women. As people who have dealt with people who have been sexually assaulted in our own country would know, the impact of this kind of violence can go on for generations and breaking that generational cycle of social and mental distress and fragmentation in communities takes a particular focus and takes a lot of support of the communities.

We understand that no country is exempt from these issues but there have been particular hot spots. The conflict that we have seen in the Solomons has highlighted this issue. One of the explanations for violence against women in the Solomons is the tradition of a 'bride price'. The wife is expected to be subordinate and obey her husband. There are certain expectations concerning women. I do not like to use the word object because I am aware that, from our cultural perspective, it is easy to judge other countries. There is a very different approach to the status of women in some of our neighbouring countries.

I do hesitate bringing only a western perspective to this issue because understanding cultures requires us to go far deeper. We have much to learn from these countries in supporting them through this. No matter what culture we are talking about, violence against men and women is unacceptable.

The support that we can provide to those who are trying to break this cycle of violence is absolutely essential. The Solomon Islands is one of six Pacific Island nations without a female member of parliament. There are not a lot of prominent powerful women within their official structure. Education is neither free nor compulsory. As a result, it is estimated that two-thirds of the female population is illiterate.

The Solomon Islands has recognised this issue. In 2003 it announced that it would formulate a national policy on violence against women and establish counselling services for victims of torture or rape. I understand that to date neither of these have been achieved. I would certainly urge members of this parliament to look for ways to build those support networks in our neighbouring countries. Once again, it is not about coming in as western parliamentarians and telling people how they should order and structure

their lives. But there is a need for us to focus on the worrying issues. We need to look honestly at how these issues also affect and impact upon women in our own communities. We need to share with those who are trying to make a difference in the Solomon Islands that violence is never acceptable regardless of culture, regardless of history. Breaking that cycle takes a tremendous amount of understanding the cultural values that underpin it.

We need to try to support those who are the champions of change. It is often the champions of change who live in communities who face the greatest threat of all. For them to be effective they need to be surrounded by people who can be with them in the long term. As members of Queensland parliament we need to look better at how we, and hopefully others in other parliaments, can provide that network to them. It is the champions of change who live within communities who most of all need the support of many people to make a difference in the long term. I support the motion before the House and urge the support of all members.