



# The University of Fiji

(An Entity of Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji)

## Celebrating International Day of Rural Women.

### **Media Statement**

The University of Fiji Vice Chancellor, Professor Shaista Shameem, speaking as Chief Guest at the International Day of Rural Women hosted by the Lautoka Market Vendors Association and supported by UN Women on Friday 28<sup>th</sup> October at the Sugar City Mall in Lautoka, told the gathering that a completely new world order was needed to provide support and comfort to women market vendors who sacrificed so much in order to enable people in office jobs to put food on the table for their own families daily.

Professor Shameem said the town and city councils should take a good hard look at whether the amenities and facilities provided to market vendors were adequate in sanitation, clean water supply, a place where they could make their own tea, and well-being while they spent long hours in the market supplying fresh vegetables and produce to the public.

She urged the Market Vendors Association to call for their proper representation in provincial, town and city councils to make their voices heard by those in authority and power so that their conditions of life and work could improve.

Professor Shameem said women market vendors for several years had seen themselves as ‘critical agents of change in the fight against rural poverty, hunger and malnutrition’, but no one else seemed to give them the support they needed because ad hoc policies which affected their representation in civic life were implemented without sufficient and meaningful consultation. She urged the Lautoka Women Vendors Association to lead the way in calling for their proper representation in town and city councils so that their work lives could improve as they took responsibility for feeding families in Fiji with cost-effective and nutritious produce daily, sacrificing their own needs along the way.

Professor Shameem said that a new movement was being launched, called the Design for Life which looked at rebalancing the world, ensuring resilience in all aspects of life, and actively planning regeneration and renaissance for the future. The movement had people, places and planet as its core values. This was the movement that the University of Fiji was fostering among

civil society groups. She said that in the Design for Life effort, everyone should seriously ask town planners whether they were designing towns and cities for the public good, or only for the betterment of some people at the expense of others. This included road planning, parks, public buildings construction and pedestrian access. The concept of the civic market needed to be carefully considered in this perspective to ensure that every user had the same rights as others to public spaces and amenities.

Professor Shameem also noted the points made earlier this year at a Labasa Women Vendors workshop where the women vendors and participants said they needed (i) price control for vegetables from the suppliers; (ii) better roads and infrastructure so that access to the markets for their own produce was made easier; (iii) consultation before laws were passed that affected their work as market vendors, especially laws about adequate provincial, town and city council representation; (iv) access to proper and comprehensive information from the authorities; (v) ramps in markets and other public places for people with disabilities and older women; and (vi) a voice at all levels of civic life. Professor Shameem said she would add animal welfare in towns and cities to the list.

On representation, Professor Shameem said that, in the past, town and city councils were elected and so women market vendors could go to their representatives who were voted in on all the councils and express their voices to seek help. But now this avenue of easy access to the councils was not possible for them as no one had the time and easy access to the bureaucrats running civic life. The current model was alienating for the ordinary people who could not wait in line for long hours to be heard on their issues. She called on all town and city councils to ensure that women market vendors had all the amenities they required at their places of work so that they could feed the rest of the population with comfort. And she called on women market vendors to express their voices so that they could be heard by their town and city councils.

Professor Shameem said she herself often stopped at a vegetable stall on the way home after a busy day in the office, sometimes very late in the evening, and without the market vendors near her place of work she would not be able to feed her family with fresh vegetables and produce. She said she was indebted to the market vendors as they allowed her to fulfil her duties to her own family.

She called to the public to speak up on the women vendors' behalf also as it was unfair to expect them to go it alone.