**PRESS RELEASE**

**United Nations launches Pacific campaign against homophobia and transphobia**

Suva, 6August, 2015 – The United Nations marked a historic step towards protection of the human rights of lesbian, gay bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people with the launch on 5 August of the Pacific UN Free & Equal Campaign – a regional campaign against homophobia and transphobia. The initiative, which is a spin-off of the global United Nations Free & Equal Campaign led by the UN Human Rights Office, was a joint effort of a number of organizations.

Governments, human rights activists, national human rights institutions, UN officials and other stakeholders from across the Pacific attended the event, shared their perspectives of the situation of LGBTI people and called for action to combat homophobia and transphobia. Government representatives of among others Samoa and Tonga were present, in addition to Fiji. The event also featured mesmerizing performances, including by Kiti Niumataiwalu, the Voice of Fiji, and the Rainbow Pacific Free & Equal Choir, created specifically for the campaign launch.

United Nations Resident Coordinator ad interim, Karen Allen, explained that “The Pacific UN Free & Equal campaign aims to challenge negative stereotypes of LGBTI people and promote measures to protect the human rights of all people, regardless of who they are or whom they love.”

H.E. Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, President of Fiji, a proud ally of the Free & Equal Campaign, appealed to States across the Pacific to join the fight for LGBTI equality: “We all need to examine what we can do better, how we can take further steps, what practical measures can be adopted, to protect the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people.”

The Chair of the Pacific Sexual Diversity Network, Joey Joeleen Mataele, shared her journey towards acceptance in her community as a Leiti in Tonga: “I was the first one to wear a dress to church… I had a bit of fear, a bit of insecurity, but at the same time I said to myself: I am what I am, and no-one’s going to change this.”

Hon. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Acting Prime Minister of Fiji, spoke of Fiji’s trajectory from decriminalizing same sex relations in 2010, to the current ban on discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity and expression. He emphasized that “You can have laws, but attitudes also need to change. [They] need to change in our homes, as well as within different government agencies.“

Gillio “Gigi” Baxter of V-Pride Foundation and star of the Vanuatu TV show “Love Patrol” also attended the event. She emphasized that public education – which is the main purpose of the Free & Equal campaign – is essential to change attitudes towards LGBTI people. ‘Love Patrol’ has been able to do this by featuring the lives and stories of LGBTI people in the show.

Louisa Wall, Member of Parliament, New Zealand, underlined the need for Governments and civil society to work together: “The decriminalization of homosexuality in New Zealand was eventually successful because politicians worked with the people. This change was hard fought, enabled by collective action and steadfast advocacy."

The role that religious communities can play in challenging prejudice was also addressed. Rev. Jeremaia Waqainabete, Superintendent of Methodist Church of Fiji said: “We are all children of God and we have the right to enjoy the fullness of life offered by God to human kind.”

Noelene Nabulivou and Lucille Chute of DIVA for Equality stressed that LGBTI people are parts of a multitude of communities. “That’s why it’s important to ensure that we ​respect and appreciate diversity in ​our messages and ​​include the voices of LGBTI ​who are also people with disabilities, older, younger, women, those​ living in urban informal settlements, rural and ​remote communities, and​ others that are less heard.”

Catherine Phuong, Acting Head of the UN Human Rights Office for the Pacific concluded the event, saying, “The Free & Equal campaign which we are launching today provides an opportunity for leaders, artists, journalists, activists, teachers, parents, and indeed all of us, to take an active stance against prejudice and to support our LGBTI colleagues, neighbors, friends and family members.”

Two new campaign videos – “I’m a Proud Pacific Islander” and “For a Free & Equal Pacific” – were screened at the launch, as well as a video by UNAIDS on sexuality and gender identity in Papua New Guinea. The videos feature the faces and voices of LGBTI people and their allies from across the Pacific and can be viewed here:

‘For a Free & Equal Pacific’: <https://youtu.be/fjrlX-AEQG8>

‘I’m a Proud Pacific Islander’: <https://youtu.be/QX9gyAokQWw>

‘I am proud of who I am’: <https://vimeo.com/100000779>

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**Background**

The Pacific UN Free & Equal campaign extends the reach of the global UN Free & Equal campaign, launched in July 2013 by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, with a simple message: LGBTI rights are human rights. The campaign seeks to challenge negative stereotypes of lesbian, gay bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people and promote measures to protect the human rights of everyone, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity and intersex status.

The Pacific UN Free & Equal campaign is a joint initiative of UN agencies including OHCHR, UNDP, UN Women, UNAIDS, UNESCO, UNV, WHO, IFAD with DIVA for Equality, the Pacific Sexual Diversity Network and ILGA Oceania, as well as a number of national partners across the Pacific with the support of the EU Delegation for the Pacific, the US Embassy Suva, the French Embassy Suva, and the Asia-Pacific Forum.

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Learn more about the global Free & Equal campaign at [www.unfe.org](http://www.unfe.org/)