

PRESS RELEASE



Fiji Truth Commission Charts a New Course with Trauma-Informed Practice

Monday, 19 May 2025: Researchers Manoa Rokotavaga and Maggie Kuruwale of the Fiji Truth and Reconciliation Commission (FTRC), like many of their colleagues, are venturing into uncharted waters as the nation embarks on the pivotal journey towards healing and reconciliation.

They were among over 20 staff members, including the Commissioners, from this independent body established for truth-telling, reconciliation, and national healing, who gathered at the Pasifika Communities University (PCU) campus in Nasese for a two-day Trauma-Informed workshop.

FTRC is collaborating with UNICEF Pacific and other key stakeholders to ensure that trauma counselling and support mechanisms are in place as the Commission prepares to engage members of the public who have survived various forms of human rights abuses following political upheavals since 1987.

Commissioner Rajendra Dass underscored the significance of this moment in the Commission's broader mission. "To listen to stories of suffering without perpetuating harm requires more than empathy; it demands structure, awareness, and responsibility," he said. "This training is a critical step in building a Commission that not only uncovers the truth but does so with care, courage, and compassion."

The sessions, held on Thursday and Friday, marked a major milestone in the Commission's commitment to embedding trauma-informed approaches into all aspects of its work. This is especially important in its engagement with survivors, witnesses, staff members, and communities affected by Fiji's political history.

The training highlighted the crucial role of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), ensuring that as the Commission collects and documents stories of truth and resilience, it does so in ways that are sensitive, ethical, and supportive.

For 26-year-old policy officer Manoa Rokotavaga, the workshop was unlike anything he had experienced before. “It unpacked trauma in all its complexities,” he said. “I’ve never had a space where we were encouraged to explore how trauma affects us and those we serve.”

One lesson that stood out to him was understanding the difference between compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma. “This really hit home,” he shared. “Our work involves listening to stories of pain and violence. I feel better equipped to assess my emotional readiness before interviews, and more importantly, to care for myself in the process.”

For Maggie Kuruwale, a 30-year-old researcher with a background in community development through the NGO sector, the workshop was both personally and professionally transformative.

“It has been a very enlightening and confronting two days,” she said. “The scenarios really made me reflect on my own capacity and the importance of caring for ourselves while doing this work.”

Ms Kuruwale emphasised the delicate balance involved in gathering truthful accounts without retraumatising those who share them. “We must learn to hold their stories with care, gather their experiences objectively, and always protect their dignity,” she said.

She added that the workshop offered more than just techniques. “Personally, I will use the concepts I’ve learned to better understand and manage the issues I struggle with, which ultimately influences the quality and impact of my work.”

Workshop facilitator Father Ioane Sigarara reflected on the experience of working with FTRC staff and commissioners.

“We’ve shared insights on trauma, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue, which are critical areas that can significantly impact professionals in high-stakes environments,” Father Sigarara said.

UNICEF Mental Health Specialist Dr Koen Sevenants commended the FTRC for its proactive approach. “It’s been a fantastic experience to work with the Commission,” he said. Highlighting the challenges ahead, he added, “They will be exposed to a lot of adversity and traumatic stories,” but remained hopeful. “There’s more work ahead, but it’s amazing that it already starts with taking care of people.”

As the nation moves forward on its truth-telling journey, these workshops represent more than professional development. They lay the foundation for a Commission that listens with empathy, protects with purpose, and works toward healing with integrity.

Through this trauma-informed lens, researchers like Ms Kuruwale and Mr Rokotavaga are not only excavating the past. They are holding space for a nation's recovery.

About FTRC:

The FTRC is an independent entity set up for truth-telling, reconciliation, and national healing. The mandate of the FTRC is to examine past political upheavals and their impact on people's lives. The Commission is looking at the physical and emotional harm, loss of life and property, and systemic injustices on people.

The purpose of this work is to foster unity and social cohesion in a society where everyone feels safe, equal, included and able to thrive. The Commission seeks to honour the lived experiences of survivors by providing a platform for voices to be heard, validated, and acknowledged.

The Commission emphasises that truth-telling is not about retribution. It is about recognition, healing, to ensure that history is not repeated. Through reconciliation, the Commission aims to build a stronger, more just, and peaceful Fiji for future generations.

Note: The Commission is encouraging members of the public to contact us in relation to any of the above. We look forward to hearing from you. Reach us by phone, email, or through our Facebook page, where a contact form is also available.

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