



Human Rights at Sea Case Study

A Family Perspective:
Testimony of Fijian Fishing
Widows, Mother and Sister



Human Rights at Sea

CASE STUDY - A FAMILY PERSPECTIVE

“He was stabbed with a knife below his heart by a Chinese crewman.”

Meredani Kali

Human Rights at Sea hears the first-hand testimony of the widows and families of Fijian crewmen who died after many years operating as crew on longline fishing vessels operating out of Fiji. The following case study highlights the conditions and challenges faced by crew members' family members left behind after the loss of their menfolk as breadwinners. The study is aimed at exposing and educating those who do not understand the background to, and the context of, commercial fishing in the Pacific region.

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Meredani Kali

Meredani Kali is from Moala Island in Fiji. Her husband was Joeli Nailati. He was stabbed with a knife below his heart by a Chinese crewman on the Taiwan-owned longline fishing vessel *Yuh Yih* no. 12 on the 5th December 2008 when the vessel was fishing in Solomon Islands waters.

Meredani found out that her husband was dead when she went to get her portion of his monthly wage from the company. “They told me (incorrectly) that he had died the day before”. “His body was in a plastic bag, and it was black”. After one year, the Fiji Department of Labour paid her F\$24,000 in compensation. “I don’t know if the Chinese was arrested and charged; **till today I do not know where the case is up to and what happened**”.

The crew’s 12-man complement on *Yuh Yih* no. 12 comprised Joeli, another Fijian, Indonesians, Chinese and a Korean captain. The vessel had been at sea for one month when the incident occurred.

Joeli was from Daku village, Tailevu; for 16 years he had worked as crew on fishing vessels. They have four children: the eldest, a girl, is now 25 years old; the eldest boy was about eight years old when his father was killed. Joeli was 33 years old when he died; he and Meredani were only two weeks’ married at that time.

As a crewman, after all deductions were made (for his food, boots and raincoat, cigarettes) the total Joeli would receive was F\$500 for three months’ work and Meredani would receive F\$300.

Meredani said that the memory of her husband’s death is still fresh in her mind and haunts her to this day. According to Meredani, the company only gave her F\$2,000 for funeral expenses, so she also wonders if she could have received more compensation from the Chinese man and the company. Her life since then has been a struggle; she secured work as a housekeeper.

PACIFIC DIALOGUE COMMENT:

Meredani’s husband had been stabbed brutally resulting in death while working for his employer. While the Chinese man was convicted for murder (and is still serving his sentence) newspaper reports, updates of all trials and results on court handling and decisions made in relation to Meredani’s husband’s case were never conveyed to Meredani by the legal counsel - or anyone. Pacific Dialogue located newspaper reports and secured a copy of the judgment and sentence handed down and gave them to Meredani: it was very emotional for her, but their receipt has empowered her because just recently she has approached a local bank to access Joeli’s frozen bank account to enable her to pay for their youngest’s school needs, and she plans to seek legal advice to secure the remainder of Joeli’s salary.



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Susanna Corocoro

Susanna Corocoro is from Rewa. Her husband, Tuelovoni Saitoro, always wanted to be a fisherman; he was from Tailevu. They had been married 15 years when he went to sea, and had three children. He spent another 14 years on different fishing vessels - most of them were owned by 'Sea Quest', once on a 'Solander' company vessel, and occasionally on a Chinese vessel; he died in 2015.

Susanna recalls that their house was incomplete when he went to sea for the first time.

“**One time when he came back at the end of a voyage, he complained of severe pains in his stomach. Susanna took him to the doctor's and begged him not to go back to sea, but Tue was worried about otherwise finding money to look after the children so he went back. However, his health deteriorated further at sea so he was brought back to Fiji.**”

After three days at home, Susanna took him again to the doctors at CWM (hospital) who identified that her husband had a growth on his liver; it oozed puss. **The doctors recommended a course of antibiotics but Tue and Susanna had to pay for it: they had no money to buy them.** So they approached some relatives for a loan, and if that would not be forthcoming they'd wait for Tue's next salary from the fishing company - but which was not forthcoming before he died. Tue's death certificate records that his passing was the result of a ruptured liver mass.

When her husband died, Susanna got no compensation, nor funeral or other expenses; "the company didn't even pay his last salary". Friends donated for the funeral.

Like Meredani, Susanna had to find work straight away and ended up as a housekeeper. Currently she is attending a 'Solo Mums' workshop three days a week: it is run by some New Zealand women; she learns skills such as jewellery-making, cooking and sewing and says that when she has completed the three-month course, she will get a 'business starter kit'. Susanna found out about the course from the village headman who gave out the application forms.

PACIFIC DIALOGUE COMMENT:

Because Susanna was not certain of vessel names and fishing companies which had engaged Tuelovoni, we sought information from each of the companies. At time of writing, Fiji Fish told us that Tuelovoni had been engaged by it for a few years in the early 1990s only, and Solander has no record of him. Our subsequent attempts (through the Fiji Revenue & Customs Service, the Department of Immigration, and the FNPF superannuation fund) were unsuccessful or are unresolved. Two reasons for this lack are that (a) in Fijian society the male breadwinner might not discuss his work with his wife and family and also because he inclines to the company of men friends when ashore, and the women tend not to ask, and (b) many Fijians have a suite of names and may use combinations of them in different situations.

Susanna now is encouraged by Meredani to approach the Department of Labour for compensation.

“When her husband died, Susanna got no compensation, nor funeral or other expenses; the company didn't even pay his last salary.”



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“His body was swollen, especially his legs... There was no medication on board.”

Maraia Vuki

Maraia Vuki is from Levuka. Her husband had been on the vessels but then stayed ashore where he worked for a security company at the (nearby) cement works; he died from a heart attack, aged 42 years. Maraia’s husband was from Mokani village, near Bau Island in Tailevu. They had four children - two boys and two girls.

When his father died suddenly, their eldest son, Jone Bonakeli, was in Form 3 at Suva Grammar (about 18 years of age). He had always wanted to go to sea, so when the father died Jone offered to go to sea so he could be the breadwinner for the family and thus enable his mother to stay at home to look after the younger children. So he went to sea: he was employed by ‘Solander’ and a Chinese company via ‘Fiji Fish’ company at Wailada. His work on the vessels rotated between fishing (hauling and setting the line) and being the iceman. He told his mother that ‘any’ food was given to them on board, and that they usually got only three or four hours’ sleep each night. There were usually four Fijians on the vessels.

Jone spent six years on the vessels; he died in April 2018.

He got sick on board and was transferred to another vessel on its way to Suva. Maraia was told to come and wait for the vessel because her son was sick. His body was swollen, especially his legs; he had difficulty talking, and walking. There was no medication on board. The family tried steam-bathing him but he would tell his mum that he couldn’t feel a thing. They also went to the extent of boiling water and directly pouring it into a bucket for him to dip his swollen legs into, but he would still say that he felt nothing. So Maraia took him to the CWM hospital - where shortly afterwards, Jone died.

Jone’s last contract was for four months but she/he only received two weeks’ pay. There was no compensation, and nothing to help with the funeral expenses: Maraia had to withdraw from her own FNPF (superannuation fund) savings and, like the other women’s statements you have just read about, had to find work in a hurry and is a housekeeper.



PACIFIC DIALOGUE COMMENT:

Jone’s death certificate reveals that he died from congestive cardiac failure, (the result of) atrial fibrillation and valvular heart disease. Two medical practitioners told us that these symptoms are almost certainly caused by Rheumatic Fever which is related to a streptococcal infection in children and can eventually lead to valve problems and atrial fibrillation. The swollen legs would be a manifestation of the congestive cardiac failure, because the heart cannot keep the blood circulating, so it builds up in the wrong places (lungs, legs...). Rheumatic heart disease is not uncommon in undeveloped countries where it goes undetected and so antibiotics are not prescribed in its early stages. Although Maraia told us that Jone was a ‘normal’ rugby-playing teenager there is a slim possibility that the work and on-board conditions exacerbated his condition.

Although sighting of a medical certificate is among the requirements of fishing companies engaging crew, rigorous adherence to this rule does not appear to exist - and neither by some applicants. Fiji Fish confirmed that Jone had been engaged by one of its subcontracted Asian vessels in recent years, and Solander reported that he had worked on one of its vessels spasmodically in 2013 and 2014.



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Serema Maravu

Serema Maravu is a fourth generation Solomon Islander. Her husband works on a U.S.A. company's troll boat and has been so engaged for about 30 years; they have four children.

Serema's brother died on the 'Fiji Fish' company-owned vessel F/V Wasawasa I on 7 March 1997, during Cyclone Gavin; the vessel sank with all hands (it had a crew of ten).

Serema's brother was Epeli Droma. Born in 1975, he would have been 22 when the incident happened; he had a five-month-old son at that time. Serema and Epeli's mother brought the child up, but the (Grand) mother died in 2004. In compensation, the family received a F\$15,000 settlement, followed by F\$50 a week between March 1997 and 2001, and a 10 kg fish between 2001 and 2004.

PACIFIC DIALOGUE COMMENT:

The inquiry into the sinking of the F/V Wasawasa I was conducted by the Fiji Marine Board of Inquiry, within the Fiji Maritime Safety Authority. **The Board's report of the inquiry is not public, requiring a Court order to access.** However, newspaper reports of the inquiry refer to the vessel being faced by 14-metre waves and winds of 90 knot strength.

Impact Statement

Pacific Dialogue asked the women for their impact statements. Maraia summed up their opinions: "The Government should look after the families. No-one from Government or the company came to the funeral and none of them asked how the family (would) manage". Susanna added that "(the) women are left to cope alone in this industry".

Disclaimer

The content and detail within this Case Study has been provided to Human Rights at Sea by the widows of the crewmen. The contents of the submitted text have been checked, as best as is possible, for accuracy by the authors at the time of writing. Human Rights at Sea is not liable in anyway, whatsoever, in any jurisdiction, for the contents of this case study which has been translated and published in good faith following investigation by the Charity. All text and pictures have been acknowledged where able. Any omissions or factual inaccuracies may be alerted by writing to: enquiries@humanrightsea.org. The opinions, perspectives and comments are solely those of the author supported by the evidence disclosed.

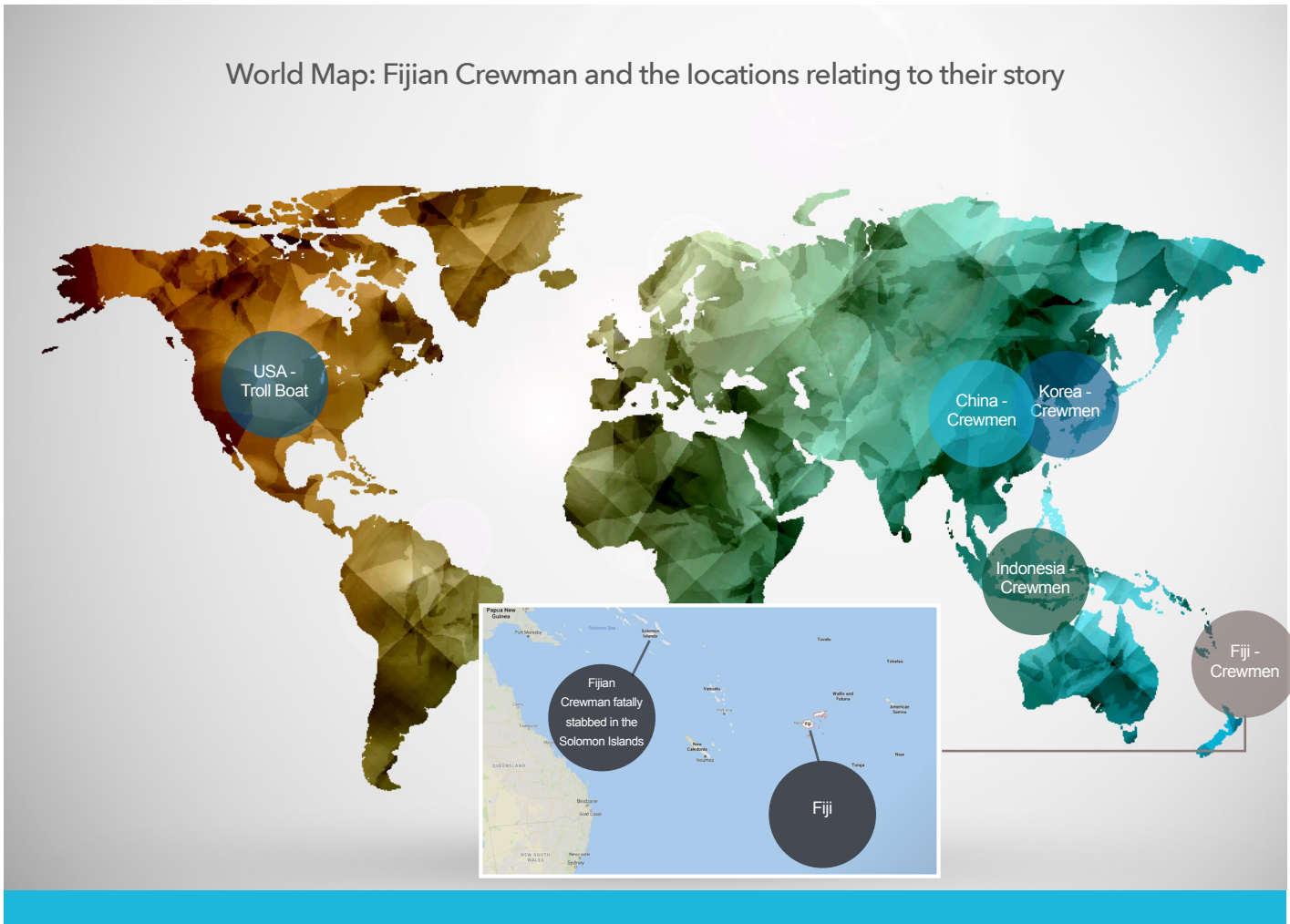


HUMAN RIGHTS AT SEA



“There was no compensation and nothing to help with the funeral expenses.”

World Map: Fijian Crewman and the locations relating to their story



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Fishing Widows, Mother
and Sister

Human Rights at Sea is a Registered Charity in England and Wales No. 1161673. The organisation has been independently developed for the benefit of the international community for matters and issues concerning human rights in the maritime environment. Its aim is to explicitly raise awareness, implementation and accountability of human rights provisions throughout the maritime environment, especially where they are currently absent, ignored or being abused.

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