

# MOE TURAGA

FREEDOM AWARDS  
KEYNOTE SPEECH



24 MARCH, 2023

Good evening.

I begin by acknowledging the land and waters that we're meeting on tonight.

I pay my respects to the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation,  
to Elders Past and Present and those emerging leaders of the future.

I acknowledge public figures previously mentioned by the MC,  
the many organisations among us today,  
and those of any Indigenous lands that I haven't mentioned.

Tonight I am supported by my Salvos Lived Experience Tribe,  
my Catholic Anti-slavery family,  
the Survivor Advisory Council,  
my Fijian family members, friends and supporters.

I'm honoured and humbled to speak to you.

Many of you here know me already.

For those that don't,

I am one of a number of people who has experienced modern slavery in Australia.

For the past five years, I have been sharing my story as a survivor,  
and calling for change.

I've done this as an advocate for the Modern Slavery Act,  
for the just treatment of people in modern slavery,  
and for migrant workers at-risk of abuse and exploitation.

Slavery can be an uncomfortable word.

The term survivor can also be tricky to navigate.

Think about our immediate Australian context.

Most people think a survivor is a reality TV personality.

Are you a hero or a villain?

Can you get immunity from being voted off the island this week?

Survivors are attached to various government Inquiries and Royal Commissions that confront the most challenging social issues in our society.

And others overcome life-threatening illnesses, accidents and disasters beyond their control.

Either way, survivor experiences are often shared as part of another narrative.

I'll come back to the "survivor voice" in a minute.

But first...

There are those of you here tonight who haven't heard my story.

This is the shortest version ever told.

At the age of 17, I was 'deceptively recruited' by a trusted relative in Fiji to come to Australia to pick fruit and do farm work.

My passport was taken

and I worked for two whole years.

There were never any wages paid into my hand,

only a small amount of money for food was given.

All this time I thought my earnings were sent to my widowed mother in Fiji.

Has anyone here ever worked for an entire day in horticulture?

Picking, packing and pruning - it's really hard work.

After two years of hard labour, I managed to access a free pay phone.

I called Mum to see how she was going...

Her first question was – where's the money?

My heart sank.

Shock, denial, anger, depression – I had all those feelings and worse.

Betrayal and injustice are feelings that burn inside.

Thank God - I was helped out of my "situation"

by some beautiful church-going people who just wanted me to be treated fairly.

Like many others who have found themselves in my position,

for many years I didn't tell my story.

I just got on with life.

Years later, I was invited to join a meeting at my workplace –  
the Salvation Army in Bundaberg.

I met people who inspired me with their courage and purpose  
in telling their stories of loss and injustice in Australian horticulture.

I saw how stories could mobilise people for change,  
and I felt it was time to share my experience.

I've had a lot of support in how to do this.

Since then I shared my story and recommendations at the Bali Process,  
the Parliamentary Inquiry into a Modern Slavery Act,  
the Human Rights Commission, UN Global Compact,  
with corporate groups, church gatherings and the media.

These days I'm very comfortable to talk about "deceptive recruitment" when  
sharing my "lived experience" with an audience of "modern slavery experts".

Which brings me back to "survivor" – and the phrase, "survivor voice."

There are many survivors of modern slavery in Australia who have had similar experiences to me.

There are people working in our domestic fresh food supply chain right now who are in the same position I was in back in the day.

Yet Australian policy makers and law enforcement bodies still have difficulty getting people to tell them their stories.

And this means they cannot collect enough evidence to convict perpetrators of a modern slavery offence.

Here are a few things I think can help.

Firstly – we need a safe and stigma-free environment.

Survivors must be physically, emotionally and culturally safe, and their families need to be protected from possible retaliation.

Perpetrators have many coercive techniques, and they aren't afraid to use them.

Also modern slavery can leave a person feeling disempowered, even after they become free.

Survivors may feel ashamed, that they've failed their families and communities, and we may suffer from low self-esteem.

Most of us just want to get on with our lives.

For those who do find the support to speak up, we may be greeted by scepticism, doubt or victim-blaming.

Questions like "why didn't you just leave", or "you knew you were coming to work here", or "isn't it better than what you would have at home?".

Growing up in Fiji I never believed that I could lose my freedom and be exploited. But, I was.

Generally most people still don't believe that slavery happens in Australia, present company excepted.

There's little sympathy for workers who flee their approved employers under the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme.

Now there are plans to bring more people over to work in aged care.

Why would we do this without first fixing existing problems?

There are also many thousands of people without a visa living and working in Australia.

They are in very precarious work and vulnerable to bad operators.

Australian immigration officials always seem to be in a hurry to deport people...

Creating a real safety net that would help identify victims of modern slavery doesn't seem to be a priority.

Survivors of modern slavery and migrant workers at-risk are all people with lived experience.

If we are valued and supported, we can lead policy-makers, business and communities to solutions that make a difference on the ground.

When the Hidden in Plain Sight report published the transcript of my testimony in full,

I had a great sense of achievement, it motivated me and gave me courage to keep going.

Seeing it there as part of the official record that helped lead to passage of the Modern Slavery Act made it all feel worthwhile.

And now over 3000 companies are reporting their actions to prevent modern slavery in their operations and supply chains.

Another example of valuing survivor input is when I was asked to contribute to the Coles Ethical Retail Supply Chain report on accommodation for horticulture workers.

This report addresses the crisis in housing for farmworkers, the lack of standards, and the ways that deductions are used to siphon off income from workers. This important project is in partnership with the Australian Workers Union. And I was publicly acknowledged in the report for my contribution.

A lot of people in this room have done a lot to get us to where we are today.

But the reality is that people in slavery in Australia and around the world need us to go much further much faster.

Any day now, the Modern Slavery Act review report and recommendations will be made public.

We know the Australian government wants to strengthen the Act.

We know that the Act only came about in the first place, because Andrew Forrest and the business community had the vision to get behind it.

As we move into this new phase of our struggle, who among us will amplify survivor voices?

Who will speak out and support welfare for the vulnerable and hold bad operators and criminals to account?

Who will hold governments, the public sector and law enforcement bodies to account?

Who will build alliances between business, communities and vulnerable workers?

There are a lot of questions, hanging in the air.

People in slavery are counting on us to take a leap forward together.

I hold out hope that an Independent Federal Anti-Slavery Commissioner will make a difference in Australia's modern slavery space.

Keeping a united front and including more stakeholders is going to be crucial.

Getting our voices behind amendments that will strengthen Australia's Modern Slavery Act is going to be an important early step.

There's a lot to talk about together.

I look forward to hearing your stories tonight.

God bless you all, and let's keep fighting the good fight.

Thank you! Vinaka!