

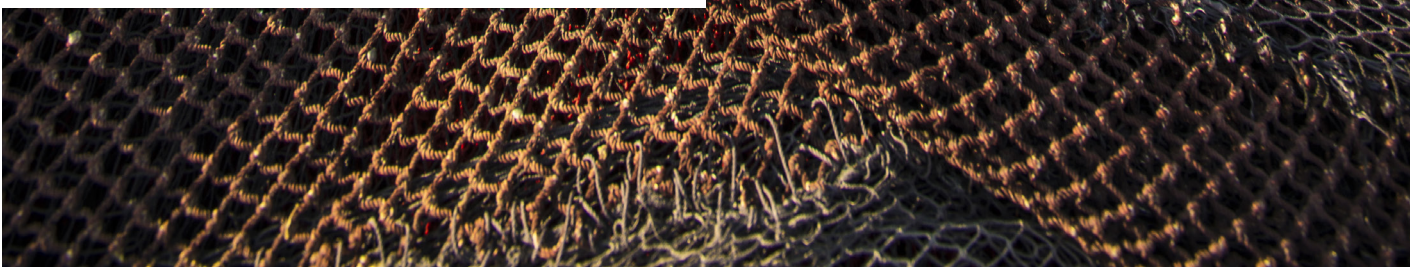


HUMAN RIGHTS AT SEA



Human Rights at Sea Case Study **A Family Perspective in their Own Words**

Salote Kaisuva, the widow
of Fijian crewman Mesake,
who worked on Taiwanese
Longliners.



Human Rights at Sea

CASE STUDY - IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“The vessel berthed early before I could get to the wharf (which is not far-distant) and I saw my husband staggering along the path to our house, bent over and clutching his stomach; I could see in his eyes that he was approaching death.”

Salote Kaisuva

Human Rights at Sea hears the first-hand testimony of the widow of a Fijian crewman who died after over thirty years operating as crew for Taiwanese long-liner fishing vessels. The following case study highlights the conditions and challenges faced by fishing crews, and the effect on the family members left behind after the loss of the main source of family income. 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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Background

“ I am the widow of Mesake Kaisuva, a crewman who died on 4 February 2013.

Mesake was born on 31 December 1962. His father beat him very often; his schooling was irregular. In 1983, when just 21 years of age and shortly after our marriage, he was recruited as a crewman by the Burns Philp Shipping agent and from that time on, 30 years, he was a crewman until his death.

My husband’s wage was F\$15 a day, or F\$105 a week. We were given F\$100 advance as his salary for the whole month. It was all that was left after a gross of cigarettes (valued at F\$150) and other deductions (for his on-board food, and clothing such as boots and jacket) were taken off his salary. **As a wife, I would ensure that the F\$100 was spent carefully as it was all that we had to accommodate us for a whole month until the next pay;** I tried my best to accept that amount. After every three months, his vessel would return: we would look forward to seeing him again, and the company would pay his next salary after taking deductions.

The contract was between the Master of the vessels and individual crew. Deductions from pay were determined by the captains of the vessels. The majority of crew on the boats were Asians, and about four would be Fijians. We learned that the Asians (Chinese) were farmers who had been offered work in Fiji on farms; we would see them arrive together on a bus (from the airport), carrying their suitcases; their wages were less than the Fijians’ wages.

There were about 18-23 crew on each vessel. When the boats changed over the foreign crew, the four Fijians would be retained, to train the new crew. **But nowadays, Fijian crew are only hired when there is a shortage of crew.** The Fijians were employed only as deckhands. As they are physically stronger than the Asians they did the heavy work of line hauling, stacking fish, unloading, and restocking ice and equipment. **The Fijian crew were given the heaviest duties.**

While Mesake was working on the boats, we stayed with my parents in Kalekana because we did not have our own house. Our children loved living with their grandparents. My parents supported our family because we didn’t get much from my husband’s wage. It was painful for much of the time when he came back every three months: it took a month working at the wharf, getting the fish out of the vessel and into the freezer, but if the men did not go to work their pay got deducted. Usually, there would be only F\$500- 600 left from his three months’ pay. As a fisherman’s wife, I always looked forward to receiving a lump sum of money for the three months, **but I could see that the company was just using the men as slaves and not even giving them a rest of one week before calling them back to work at sea.** ”



Salote Kaisuva in the doorway of her tin house

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CASE STUDY - IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“ His work continued; sometimes the men were transferred from vessel to vessel. But they were treated in the same way, whatever vessel they were on. Once a fishing company did offer him F\$18 a day, which he thought would be better than the first company's offer, but after deductions it was all the same. I continued looking after the family, children attending school, paying for school fees, bus fares, food at home... In addition, **our eldest, Maria Wati was frequently ill from asthma** and was often admitted to hospital. My parents were very supportive of my situation.

Because of my difficulties at home, **I often visited the company office (in Suva) for assistance, but was always rejected.**

As a couple, we always shared the difficulties the crewmen faced while at sea: they slept for only three hours after working up to 18-20 hours each day; their clothes were always wet (20 hours of each day in wet clothes). Although food had been stocked for a three-month trip, it often was short so they had only fish to eat (although the Captain and senior crew had better food). Hearing the stories my husband shared with me, made me 'feel' for the crewmen at sea and the sacrifices they went through every three months for their families.

I wanted a house of our own for our family, so in 1997 I asked for a piece of land at Waiqanake from my mother's maternal side. We had to buy the house materials in order to build a house on that piece of land; and I also cleared the land: mangroves and swamp ferns. Even though my husband was still at sea, I tried my best to get a roof over our heads. Although that roof was only on top of a small tin shed we were proud and happy to live in it. So each time my husband, Mesake, returned he would come straight home instead of going to my parents' home in Kalekana. My husband was so proud of what we had achieved, and relieved that we had a house of our own which we owned.

We tried to extend the shed (our house) because the children were growing up and needed privacy; we managed to extend a little. Our everyday lives depended on how I could work out our daily living with only F\$100 every month received from my husband for all those years.

The children had grown and **we had to withdraw two of the boys (Apolosi Baleigasau and Joseva Vunibobo) from school because we could not pay their school fees.** The two of them joined their father: Apolosi in 2001 at 16 years of age, and Joseva in 2003, also at 16 years of age. Then the youngest, Mesake, started sailing in 2013. The father and Apolosi and Joseva joined a Taiwanese boat, De Sheng Fa no. 2 and sailed on the same vessel until 2006 when each of them sailed on different Taiwanese boats. I thanked God for protecting them and keeping His faith in us, which kept us believing in ourselves. The men sacrificed together to keep this family living. Years passed by and the two boys and their father got to understand and speak the Asian language.

“Through the hard times I faced, I would cry, but I'd hide my tears so that the children would not know how sad I was, and how hard it was for me.”



When **Apolosi** first went to sea he was excited and happy to have a job and to go on his first trip to sea. But later he told me more: he said that you have to be strong to take up this kind of work; you have to sacrifice for the cold weather, sleepless nights, lack of food, cramped and dirty conditions of the ship, bedbugs and cockroaches; they were always tired but had to keep going in order to get their work done.

As days passed, my husband, Mesake, started to get stomach aches and back pain. That is when we decided to send our second son, Joseva, off to sea. **It transpired that Joseva experienced the same things as did Mesake and Apolosi: there was no change in their work conditions.** They received F\$18 a day, but cash-in-advance increased to F\$200, so we could buy coffee, tea, Milo, toiletries, noodles, biscuits and other things. And as always, it really hurt me to see them go back to sea after hearing their stories.

Joseva told me that the fishing process involves putting bait on long lines that are dropped into the sea from the early hours of each morning, and the process can take up to nine hours. Then in the late afternoon the work of hauling in the lines would begin and would go well into the night. Then the work of gutting, weighing and cleaning the fish would begin and finally the fish were hung on hooks in the blast freezer. Then the process of baiting and dropping the lines would start again. There was also the work of stacking frozen fish in the cold freezers. In this way, for each up day there was up to 20 hours of hard labour (at F\$15 to F\$18 a day) and in between, four hours of sleep and maybe two hours for meals and a little rest.

The catch was usually albacore, bigeye and yellowfin tuna; they also caught marlin, swordfish and other bycatch including sharks (from which the crew make some money from sale of shark fins). Sometimes, huge sharks got entangled in the lines and the ship's propellers and it was a lot of work to disentangle them.

The captain deducted the cost of feeding the crew from their wages, including the cost of cigarettes and 'discipline'. The food they eat is poor in quality and sometimes they had to eat fish for days when food stocks had run out. Sometimes they are asked to work 'overtime'. The vessels are out at sea for about three months, then often less than a week ashore after each trip before the vessel sails again. ”

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CASE STUDY - IN THEIR OWN WORDS



“ After six years at sea, Joseva had to give up the job, and this is why: on 9th March 2009, an incident happened on the De Sheng Fa no. 2 which started when the men finished the morning session of hauling in the lines and went to get their breakfast. But when they got to the galley, the Chinese cook told them that breakfast was finished and there was no food. **There was a heated argument during which the cook chased Joseva around the vessel with his kitchen chopper, finally hacking him three times at the knee.** Even though Joseva was bleeding heavily, the Captain ordered that he had to continue working, and to drink a lot of water to compensate for his bleeding. There was a big fight on the ship because of this, my husband (his father) insisting that the Captain take the vessel back to port so that Joseva could be treated.

At that time, I received a phone call from Mesake, asking me if anyone from the office had contacted me about our son's injuries on board; I said 'no, no-one called me'. After he told me what happened, I visited the Police Station and reported the case, telling them when the vessel would arrive in port. I waited at the wharf but I could not see them getting off, we heard later that they'd taken him straight away to a private doctor on Rewa Street.

The doctor recommended that Joseva be taken to the CWM Hospital because the doctor could not treat him; Joseva was admitted for an operation and stayed in hospital for six days. Joseva's wound was a really bad cut; I cried when I saw his cut leg. Afterwards, the hospital gave us a letter about his injuries and told us to claim for compensation: he received only F\$3,000. I then realised that the welfare of the crew was not a company concern - instead, their main concern was making money.

My husband and other son, Apolosi, went back to sea but after a while they transferred to another fishing company based at Fiji Fishing Company. They stayed with that company for quite some time, but both of them started getting back pains because of carrying the heavy fish and wearing wet gear for 18-20 hours each day.

In 2012, I received news from the fishing company that my husband was sick and had been transferred to a vessel on its way back to Fiji; the company told me to arrange transport to take him home, that made me wonder how sick he was. **The vessel berthed early before I could get to the wharf (which is not far-distant) and I saw my husband staggering along the path to our house, bent over and clutching his stomach; I could see in his eyes that he was approaching death.** I hid my tears and the pain I felt, and took him to Dr de Asa in Ratu Sukuna Road; but the doctor just gave him a prescription for some gastric medicine. After a few days there was no improvement so I took him to the CWM Hospital where he was admitted. However, he got much worse and after one week the hospital told me that they couldn't treat him anymore and so they were sending him home, with ten morphine tablets for pain relief.

I started counting the days: my mind was spinning, thinking that at this stage of life we had nothing to share between us but days of retirement happiness together. All we'd had, had been years of work and struggle to keep the family together and hoping for something better for our children and their families. ”

Human Rights at Sea

CASE STUDY - IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“Mesake, my beloved husband and father of our children, died on 4th February 2013. I felt such pain, and I often cry when I look at our grandchildren, young Mesake, and Laisa. I was heartbroken; only God knows how much my family wished him alive.”

Salote Kaisuva

“ I asked for assistance for the funeral expenses from the company and they gave me F\$5,000. **They also promised work for me at the company but it did not happen at all - I could see that they were just comforting me and did not care at all.** I know that there are many more people facing the same problems that we faced and I wish that someone would hear our cries. It has been really difficult, sharing what my husband went through as a crewman. He has passed away because of the years of work for the fishing companies, yet they offered very little assistance. We continue to struggle to live a decent life.

My son, Apolosi gave up sailing in 2015; only his younger brother, Mesake Junior, is still sailing. **Both Apolosi and Joseva suffer from disabling cramps and back aches that prevent them from going to work for days on end.** Furthermore, they cannot assist their mother in chopping firewood, cleaning up the compound, and farming vegetables.

When he can, Apolosi works as a welder at Hume Industries, Wailada Estate; he is married with four children. Our other son, Joseva Kaisuva, is now 35 years old. He started his family in 2011 when he had to leave the vessels because of his injury. He now has three children (his wife had two children from an earlier marriage). He has back pains which often prevent him from going to work at Carpenters Tyre Centre in Walu Bay (Suva) where he now works as a tyre fitter at the rate of F\$30 net a day, when he is able to work. A deduction for the National Provident Fund is taken from his pay, unlike on the vessels where deductions were for his own ‘cost’ of work. Joseva’s wage at Carpenter’s Tyre Centre is between F\$140 and F\$150 a week, supplemented by a social welfare benefit allowance. My brother and family now live in my deceased parents’ house in Kalekana. I live in Wailekutu with 12 other people in a two-room, tin and timber ‘house’ which also has a kitchen area. I work as an office assistant at the Catholic Parish in Suva, and have applied for Workers Compensation at the Department of Labour for my husband but so far have not been told how much benefit I’ll receive. I am 54 years of age.

There are a lot of unemployed young people at Kalekana who are keen to work on fishing vessels despite the harsh conditions and low pay.

My husband and sons worked on eight Taiwanese (China Taipei) longliner vessels over the 30 years. One of them was the De Sheng Fa no. 2. ”



Salote, children Maria & Apolosi, grandchild Laisa

Disclaimer

The content and detail within this Case Study has been provided to Human Rights at Sea by the family of Mesake Kaisuva. 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.

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Salote Kaisuva

World Map:
Mesake Kaisuva, a Fijian crewman who worked on Taiwanese Longliners



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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.




We thank the NGO Pacific Dialogue for their support in bringing this case to international attention.

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VBS Langstone Technology Park, Langstone Road
HAVANT PO9 1SA, United Kingdom

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