



# Hardship Diversity Resilience

A Collection of Case Studies

Fiji Palau Samoa Vanuatu





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# Foreword

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The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted us in ways unimaginable more than a year ago and each unique experience should be treated with kindness and compassion. Due to their ethnicity, gender, religion, age, or social status—or at the intersection of these identifiers—some people in the Pacific Islands and around the world are vulnerable to disproportionate impacts that compound health, psycho-social, and economic risks.

Members of these groups may suffer from stigma, scapegoating, violence, or see a decrease in their ability to provide for themselves and their families. Disempowerment can lead people to feel isolated or discouraged to speak up, rendering their struggles invisible to society and decision makers. Furthermore, dominant narratives often portray certain groups negatively and can perpetuate preconceptions, stereotypes, and taboos that contribute to a cycle of social exclusion.

While country-level statistical data about socio-economic effects is becoming more available, the 2021 Synthesis of COVID-19 impacts on the Pacific commissioned by the Pacific Community found that there is very limited quantitative or qualitative data on how most vulnerable groups have experienced COVID-19 differently from others.

Thus, this project aims to create a safe space for diverse stories and showcase specific challenges faced by people from all walks of life. It brings forward experiences of women, youth, rural dwellers, LGBTQI+ individuals, elderly people, people with disabilities, unemployed individuals, frontline workers, and COVID-19 patients to elevate their voices and increase public awareness and empathy for their struggles.

More diverse stories encourage other people to speak up, shaping a more inclusive collective narrative of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Pacific Islands.

These case studies uncover unique ways in which the pandemic has led to job loss, reduced household income, and increased financial dependence on other family members. Furthermore, the crisis affected people's health and psychosocial wellbeing; increased socio-economic stressors have put a strain on family relations, and created a propitious environment for domestic violence.

Reduced access to services—due to restricted movement and lack of resources—affected education and healthcare, as participants speak of interrupting their education or medical treatment, and deferring school enrolment or getting medical attention. The personal stories collected in this publication speak of intense emotions of anxiety, fear of falling ill, feelings of disempowerment and frustration, and suffering vicarious trauma. These were largely caused by a compounded effect of loss of social status, livelihood, dignity, and identity. Despite a deep attachment to land and country, some feel a drive to emigrate to escape conservative socio-cultural norms or precarious economic conditions.

However, what is critical to keep in mind when discussing the experiences and needs of these groups is that, in the stories captured in this report, not a single person described themselves as “marginalized” or “vulnerable.” Rather, they saw themselves in terms of their relationships with others—their families, friends, and communities as a whole. Even when those relationships were fraught due to how others perceived their

identity, the participants in this research took these incidents of marginalization as part of their experiences, but did not allow discrimination to define them. The identities that make them “vulnerable” according to outsiders are but one thread in the woven tapestry of who they are, as individuals and as part of their communities. These personal journeys speak of drivers of resilience that supported coping and sensible strategies to adapt to the new reality. Many believe that the support of family members or friends has been essential to pushing through the most difficult instances.

As successful coping strategies, participants across geographies and population groups found that working the land and returning to traditional produce gave them some control of their circumstances and allowed them to feed their families. The traditional communal lifestyle, maintaining connection with family and friends, cooperating with others, working in teams, and sharing resources such as food, phones, computers, and housing also helped alleviate the socio-economic burdens of the pandemic.

Participants also appreciated that their upbringing, faith in God, and being able to overcome difficulties in the past have given them the strength not only to cope with this crisis themselves, but comfort and support others. Though many felt more should have been done, national governments and nonprofit organizations are credited for critical support including financial aid and assistance in case of domestic abuse.

The partnering organisations who carried out the research and transcription of the stories contained in this report were selected for their thorough understanding of the local context and having the trust of the studied communities. The case studies are brought to life by Dialogue Fiji, Living All Inclusive in Belau (Palau), Niumata Esquires (Samoa), and Vanuatu Young Women for Change.

The methodology of the research involved the use of key informant interview (KII) techniques to structure in-depth conversations with participants about their lives. The interviews were conducted in July and August 2021. Over the course of this project, the partnering organizations employed a do-no-harm approach and committed to ethical standards in line with the International Chamber of Commerce/ ESOMAR International Code on Market, Opinion and Social Research and Data Analytics. All participants gave their consent at the start of the interviews to use their stories, pictures, and names, though some subjects opted to use pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Moving forward, NDI hopes these stories will equip civil society organizations in the region with qualitative data and credible information regarding the needs of vulnerable populations as they monitor government responsiveness and advocate for inclusive response policies.

This project also aims to provide decision makers with the information to better understand how structural factors and government policy have interacted with socio-cultural norms to shape these life experiences.

Finally, this project amplifies Pacific voices to share stories from an indigenous viewpoint. Local researchers and activists in each country identified cases, collected primary data, and shared authentic stories drawing on local traditional knowledge on how to pass wisdom from generation to generation using oral tales. This report is the result of their passionate and thoughtful work.



## The Look in Their Eyes Tells You a Thousand Stories

As an operating theater nurse during a pandemic like COVID-19, I know all too well the risks of the job the minute I set foot outside the door to go to work. For many frontline health workers, treating patients with the new coronavirus can be challenging and scary. The COVID-19 cases that I've operated on were a real eye-opener for me. Trying to do my job and staying composed was a challenge. Standing long hours in personal protective equipment is not easy, and I hope many people will understand the challenges frontline workers face daily in the fight against COVID-19.



When you see patients for an initial COVID-19 screening, the look in their eyes tells you a thousand stories. You can see so much anxiety and depression, so many unanswered questions, and a desperate plea begging to be spared.

I spoke to each of my patients and continuously reassured them. I even encouraged them to ask me whatever they wanted to ask. The most common questions were: "Will I survive?", "How serious is this?", and "What's going to happen next?" A few patients said they initially thought that the virus was a hoax, until they tested positive and regretted not getting immunized earlier.

With the increasing number of COVID-19 cases, I am hopeful that Fiji can reach its target population for herd immunity. The passion and desire to join nursing was something that I had always felt. Even though there were hardly any men joining back then, I took up the challenge because I personally felt the need to make a change.

Growing up, I frequented the hospital, so every time I endured a long wait, I always wondered why. So I decided to join in an attempt to better the service and at the same time do what the nurses do. I had initially applied for medical school, but with scholarships being hard to come by, I turned to nursing, and I worked as a maternity nurse before moving to the operating theater. A typical day for a nurse before COVID-19 could start as early as 4:00 am, in order to get

ready for a 7:00 am shift. With allocated breaks in between surgeries, the job sometimes requires withstanding long hours without meals and toilet breaks. The longest shift I did was 17 hours long; with 12-hour shifts, we are lucky to have three meals while at work.

I believe nursing is a noble profession, where we get down on a more personal level with our patients and give our care a whole new meaning. Having a lot of barriers and obstacles is nothing new, as I continue to use this to push further and excel in my field.

I've received the vaccine, and I'm urging Fijians to get the jab and adhere to the COVID-19 safe practices. This is real and we need to wake up to the reality of it! After completing our roster at work, we undergo a mandatory 14-day isolation, before we go home to our families. It can get physically and mentally exhausting, but the will to push and deliver along with strong family support is what keeps me moving. Coming home and sharing my experiences of how my day went to my wife and two kids usually releases some steam.

Being a frontline worker, I am well aware of the risks that I am exposed to, but I always tell myself that this is my calling and that I am here for a purpose. I always pray first thing in the morning and before I go to sleep at night, just thanking the wonderful God we serve for protecting me and my family each and every day.

It can get hard at times being away from my family, but I'm always reminding myself to live up to the oath that I took and serve my people until the very end. I believe family support is also crucial for any frontline worker, given the high risk and exposure to COVID-19 any day on the job.

If there is one thing I've learnt during this pandemic, it is to always appreciate what you have and not take things for granted. I've already lost friends and people that I know during this pandemic, and I miss them dearly. Life is precious and each moment with your loved ones should be cherished. Live each day as if it was your last and live without regrets.—Joseph, Suva





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# My Hope for the Future

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My hope for the future is simple—a life free of the pandemic and one that would open up doors of opportunities for my children. I just hope that when this pandemic is over, my children will be able to earn a decent salary. That is my hope for the future—that they find good jobs, and that one day I will have a place to call home.

Life during the pandemic has been a struggle. For me, the virus has had a direct impact on my livelihood as a cleaner at a shopping mall on Vanua Levu. My responsibilities include

clearing up tables at the mall, and sweeping and mopping designated areas assigned to me. It's work that can be very tiring at times because you are always on your feet, but it puts food on the table and I'm grateful that I still have a job during the pandemic.

I used to earn 130-140 Fijian Dollars (USD 65) a week, but with less hours as a result of COVID-19, I earn about \$100 a week. This goes towards my family's welfare, as I have a daughter living with a disability. She receives assistance from the Social Welfare Department and that allowance supplements our family income. We are grateful to be able to receive that support as well.

Still, it's tough living off \$100 a week. Every pay day, I would divide that \$100 according to the expenses for the week. I would still think of my mother, who lives in Vuya, Nabouwalu, and her needs. Many of us earning a meagre income have felt the pinch of COVID-19 in the form of reduced work hours and pay on a weekly basis.

I am normally rostered on shift work from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm and some evenings from 1:00 pm to 8:30 pm. At first, I sold kava but did not make a lot of income. The money made was enough to cover food and other essential needs only. A taxi ride home costs just \$3, but even so I would brave the chilly evenings after work to walk home, not far from the town area, to save some money.



The buses do not operate at the hours I get off the evening shift. There are a lot of streetlights in the area, and security guards for businesses at that time of the night, so it's a bit safe walking home. However, I'm always alert when I walk home because you just never know what can happen. I am also scared when I go to work. I fear that I might get COVID-19, especially as a lot of people come together at the mall. So for

me, safety at work is paramount. I'm always cautious—I mask up and practice safe hygiene. During the week, on my days off, I would assist with home commitments and tend to the vegetable garden where beans, cabbage, bele, eggplant, and cassava grow in abundance for our sustenance. This has helped mitigate some of our living expenses, so instead of buying food from the little income we earn, we plant.

My 24-year-old daughter has been living with my elderly mother in the village, and I try to send part of my earnings there for their sustenance. I hope to bring my daughter to live with me soon because of her disability, but that would depend on improvements to Fiji's current health crisis and economy.

To understand my struggle and challenges is to understand the life I've lived. It has been one of hardship and pain. I am a survivor of domestic violence and a single mother blessed with four children. I have been living with my cousin in Labasa over the past four years, after leaving a previous relationship that at one point left me hospitalised.

My struggles and aspirations are the same as many individuals and families who have been dealt a bad hand in life. I wanted to be a teacher growing up, but I wasn't able to finish my education. My parents weren't able to pay for my fees so I left school early. Later, I found a job at a restaurant where I met the father of my children.

At one point, I used to sell assorted vegetables by the roadside on 1 Hibiscus Highway. We later moved and I took on odd jobs. I was a salesgirl at one point and later worked at a bakery. My marriage did not work out, and I knew I had to find a job to look after my children. Their well-being was what mattered to me most.

Through those trying times, the support from my cousin and her family has been overwhelming, and I am very grateful to them for being there for me. While I may not be in the profession I dreamed of as a young girl, I'm determined to build a better life for my family during the pandemic. I know it's going to be hard, but I won't give up.—Susana, Labasa



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# We Can Work Together to Return to Normalcy

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As a young sportswoman with a physical disability, I felt the same fear most people experienced when COVID-19 cases were on the rise. The pandemic claimed millions of lives worldwide and impacted billions more. It has changed lifestyles and all things considered normal in this day and age. People lost their jobs, businesses had to shut down, economies suffered, and marginalised communities were struggling to get by.

The thought of testing positive for COVID-19 did scare me because of how widespread it was in the Central Division but I've managed to keep safe by practising safety and precautionary measures—social distancing, proper hygiene and getting my first jab of the AstraZeneca vaccine.

When the second wave of the pandemic happened, I was visiting family, and the village headman implemented certain rules to keep everyone safe from COVID-19. People could go into the town areas to do their shopping or sell their produce, but only during certain days of the week.

This certainly affected people's income from selling at the market, because it meant they could only sell for two days instead of the usual six days a week. Also, the village is located in a remote part of Nadroga, and not easily accessible by vehicles, so people have to walk quite a distance with their groceries or shopping from the main road. The pandemic has really made it challenging for some people to get by.

As an athlete, the COVID-19 restrictions did have an impact on my training because gyms and training facilities had closed for quite some time. Unfortunately, this year, I was unable to meet the eligibility requirements for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics, but that has not stopped me from living my best life, all circumstances considering.

The first time I got into shot put training for the Paralympics, I felt a bit embarrassed because of my physical disability. I had to train with able-bodied athletes in the gym, and just the way some of them looked at us made me feel ashamed. It made me feel embarrassed about my disability or how I did my training routines at the gym. It wasn't a good feeling. I had to get into a more positive mindset to be able to complete my training well.

The best part is having a coach who shows genuine care. Our coach Freddy Fatiaki would always encourage and motivate us to train to our best, and to not let thoughts of discrimination or embarrassment take over. Over time that's how I pushed myself to be the best I can be.

I have so far won two gold and two silver medals in shot put at regional and international events. It has only pushed me to focus even more on the 2024 Paralympic Games in Paris. I don't look at my disability as a hindrance. I see it as part of my ability to overcome struggles and challenges in life. Having a good support system around you is vital, especially when the impact of COVID-19 can be overwhelming.

Not many people know this, but growing up, I wanted to become a teacher. However, an incident in high school resulted in my physical disability. However, I did not let this dampen my desire to learn and gain an education, which I feel is important. I studied information technology at the Fiji

National University but after my mom fell ill, I had to set aside my studies to help out at home.

I am still eager to complete my studies alongside my aspirations in athletics. Even though COVID-19 has brought about many uncertainties in life, having a positive mindset through this tough time is important as well.

In many ways, persons with disabilities are often disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 in terms of infection and movement restrictions, but getting vaccinated and adhering to safety measures are just a few ways we can work together to return to normalcy.

My advice for aspiring athletes, especially young women with disabilities, is to work hard and never give up on their dreams. Don't let your disability stop you from doing your best or achieving your goals in life. See the ability, not the disability! Here's hoping for better days ahead.—Naibili Tagicakibau, Suva, national Paralympic champion in shot put





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# Going the Extra Mile for My Students

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The current pandemic sweeping across the country has definitely had an impact on the education sector. This is especially true for teachers who have to be more proactive with their delivery methods, especially for rural families who lack the resources to gain quality education. As a teacher in a rural district in Nadi, I have experienced and seen the challenges and impact of COVID-19 on the community. With the closure of schools and subsequent transition to e-learning in an effort to stop the spread of the disease, some households in rural Nadi struggled to keep up, as they cannot

afford the luxury of a television, smartphone, or tablet. Some families are still using old models of mobile phones with buttons.

It saddens me to organize a class on Zoom knowing that some of my students are up on the hillside and cannot be part of this because they lack the technology or do not have good internet coverage to download their lesson plans and notes. For the future generation, for future leaders, this is the impact these restrictions have on their education. As a teacher, you simply do not want your students to miss out.

Most of the Year 3 students do not know how to read. It surprised me and this was something I really wanted to work on with them but when COVID-19 hit and schools closed, we had to revert to online teaching. Part of our work includes providing printed weekly home study packages for parents and guardians who are unable to access it online, but arrangements have to be made in advance for them to pick it from the school.

However, in a remote farming area, sometimes it can be hard for parents to come to the school. I decided to be proactive and take these printouts to them, even though I knew some of them lived up the hillside or at significant distance from the school. However, if I had to cross rivers and streams to deliver these worksheets I would, because these students show a keen interest to learn when we are in the classroom.

I had a student who lived at the far end of the cane field. His parents had not picked up his worksheets for the week, so I decided to take them to him. I had arranged to meet the student and his dad because I didn't want him to fall behind on his schoolwork. It took about 25 minutes on foot one way to give him his worksheet. His father had accompanied him on horseback to collect it. I did not mind doing that because I knew it was an investment in his education and future.

The other day, I visited another student to drop off her worksheet because her guardians were not responding to my calls, and she told me she had recently been discharged from the hospital. Families are going through a lot, that's for sure. The one thing I've learnt from this pandemic is to put others first, to reach out to a friend or neighbour who is going through hardship, even someone who doesn't have food or basic necessities—God will bless you.

Working remotely from home to deliver lessons as a teacher can be tough, especially due to school closures and lingering uncertainty. Because this is my first posting as a teacher, it has really taught me to be patient with my students who come from different family backgrounds and display different behaviours. But I feel that my upbringing has played a significant role in overcoming adversities and challenges, even the ones brought on by COVID-19. I was born and raised in rural Naitasiri. My father was a farmer and my mother would often sell their crops at the local market.

Growing up, my siblings and I would sometimes help our mother at the market after school. I remember putting on a brave face when my peers taunted and made fun of us for selling crops at the market. I've always wanted to be a teacher—that was my dream—but my parents struggled growing up so I stopped pursuing that for a while to help out at home. I worked at various tourism resorts until my husband encouraged me to go back to school and pursue my dream to become a teacher. So for me, walking through the cane field to deliver worksheets to my student is part and parcel of what I experienced growing up. Going up the mountains and crossing rivers is part of my life, so I didn't mind going the extra mile to reach my student.

While it has been difficult to reach some parents to discuss ways to help keep their children on track with their activities and worksheets, I've learned to use my network of friends and colleagues in the area to reach out to them. It might not be much, but my husband and I have already begun investing in technological resources, such as a projector and a personal computer, to enhance the learning experience of students in this district school. On a personal level, the COVID-19 restrictions have kept me from seeing my parents in the village. It does make me worry thinking about their well-being, but I know that someday I will be able to visit them. For now, my focus is on ensuring my students receive a quality education even during these trying circumstances.—  
Amelia, Nadi





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# COVID-19 Is Real—It's Not a Joke

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When I was told I tested positive for COVID-19 last month, my worst fear had come true. Being a frontline health worker, I knew the risks involved, but I kept hoping that I wouldn't bring the virus home to my wife and child. As I was working with other health workers in the front lines, I could sense that it was only a matter of time before I tested positive, considering the high number of positive cases I interacted with on a daily basis. I had to immediately self-isolate with my family in Suva. I had already a plan in case the inevitable was going to happen as a result of my work.

For me, dying of COVID-19 was not an option; a powerful mental, spiritual, and physical system was needed to fight the effects of the disease. When my family got tested, I could not bear to see my child being swabbed, screaming and crying—because it's an uncomfortable process—that was my worst fear.

Even amid my distress, I could see the tiredness of the team that was conducting the swabbing, and all I could do was thank them for their service. That is all we can do now—to encourage and uplift one another. For the 14 days when my family and I tested positive for the virus, we kept a very tight circle. We prayed together and stayed strong for each other. I am overwhelmed that we got through COVID-19 together as a family. Life goes on but we must stay positive through it and have trust in our body and God.

In all my career working in the health sector, the fear of the unknown that comes with the current pandemic is one of the greatest challenges facing the profession so far. Part of my schedule involves working 14 days straight with COVID-positive patients, then another 14 days in isolation, before spending a few days with my family. Whenever I leave home, I am always scared because of the number of deaths and incidents related to COVID-19. When we had our first case, we said a prayer and encouraged one another. We always hear and read about the virus but it's different when you come face to face with it.

Before I tested positive, my work involved interaction with COVID-19 positive patients. Their state did not deter our care as nurses and as a team. We did our best to reassure the patient and motivate them to push on and stay strong, constantly reminding them that they can get through it. Our main focus for us was ensuring all processes, regulations, and protocols were followed to the letter.

We had people, families at home waiting and praying for us and we were thankful every day to God that we made it. I am very empathetic towards my patients and the trauma and stress they experience in hospital. My approach to patients is simple: they could be my mother, my aunt, my father, brother, or sister. How would I want them to be treated if they were admitted? That's why I always strive to make them feel welcomed and loved, to feel the touch of warmth and genuine care even though they are dealing with a lot of emotional, mental, and physical struggles from being COVID-19 positive.

In many ways, my humble upbringing helped shape the person I am today. Those experiences gave me the confidence to tackle any challenge, struggle or obstacle that came my way. With COVID-19, those life lessons definitely motivated me to maintain a positive mindset. My parents were low-income earners, living on \$2.55 an hour, under the minimum wage. They sacrificed and persevered to overcome life's challenges, and this enabled me to find my own footing.

When I was younger, I used to help out at home and worked odd jobs for extra money. I would help my parents sell market produce by the roadside before and after school. I would spend weekends cleaning backyards and gardens for families who lent me cash to help support my family, since I was the eldest. It was hard times.

Perhaps one of the most challenging times in my life was when my mother was diagnosed with cancer. Witnessing firsthand the care and attention nurses provided my mother during her admissions to the hospital was enough to pull me into this profession, or my calling. After Year 13, I was offered a scholarship to study marine biology, but my heart was still leaning towards nursing. As my sponsor did not approve of nursing, my parents had to sacrifice once more from their superannuation savings to pay for my first semester in nursing school until I secured a scholarship and obtained a Bachelor degree in nursing science.

I've not regretted being a nurse. My advice to everyone is to get vaccinated and help us go back to normal. If you don't want to get vaccinated, that is your right, but please stay home and adhere to all COVID-19 protocols and regulations. Obedience is better than sacrifice. COVID-19 is real, it's not a joke.—Inoke Tui, Suva



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# The Bond of Brotherhood

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When the virus hit Fiji back in March 2020, many people did not realize just how devastating it was going to be for their lives and livelihoods. When it hits home, it's particularly difficult to cope. For me, perhaps one of the biggest impacts of COVID-19 has been the separation from my loved ones. I was in isolation at home in Kenani, Ba, while my wife was being treated for COVID-19 in the ICU, and my children were isolating in Namosau with their grandparents. When I did not hear from my wife for the six days while she was admitted at the Lautoka Hospital's intensive care unit, it was the worst.

I am just thankful for the support from our family, friends, doctors and nurses, and the prayers that kept my wife going. Her recovery and discharge just this week made us very grateful to have overcome this as a family.

I used to sell juice at the Ba market for a few years and, when COVID-19 struck, the immediate effect was a slowdown in the business. Vendors had to separate themselves because of social distancing and restrictions in place, so the income we earned of selling juice was not much to cater for our daily needs.

Before the pandemic, some vendors and I were earning 200-300 Fijian Dollars (USD 95-145) per week but when the first outbreak hit, we began to look at alternative sources of income. I wasn't the only one contemplating an eventual loss of income. Other families in Kenani also began to feel the pinch of widespread job losses. People who worked in the tourism sector, hotel workers, staff at the Fiji Sugar Corporation, tradesmen in carpentry, and even accountants lost their jobs.

Then we came up with the idea of offering our services through a barter system. We decided to join our skills and form the K9e Brothers, offering services in general compound reconstruction, maintenance, landscaping, and farming to those who need our assistance in exchange for whatever they are able to give us.

In April this year, when the second outbreak kicked in along with lockdowns and restricted movements, the juice business came to a halt, but we still had K9e Brothers to fall back on. It was really hard times when some of us were laid off and staying at home, but we focused on getting our K9e Brothers services going.

We try to complete our tasks according to a schedule and it makes us happy when we are able to offer our services to those who need it, while still outsourcing the juice business to a fellow brother, who would make at best 120 Fijian Dollars a week, and contribute some of that to keep our K9e work going.

In terms of fees, we offer our services to people who need it and, in return, they give whatever they want from their heart. We are happy and content with what we receive from our partners. Everything we receive in return for our services is shared equally among our 10 families combined. We have seen a lot of support being rendered to the K9e Brothers, including groceries and monetary contributions, and we have seen a lot of changes in people who live in the community.

People are encouraged by what we've done, and what the group of brothers are doing still, to stay afloat through this pandemic. The contributions in return for our services have really kept our families afloat during these troubled times. We try to get the job done well and on time. In April, we had

a busy schedule in Suva, but then the second variant spread and we found ourselves in lockdown.

We had left half of our tools in Suva when we came back to Ba because we didn't know how long the lockdowns or movement restrictions would last. For now, we are surviving on farming. We planted vegetables such as cabbage, eggplant, and coriander to help sustain us and keep the K9e brotherhood afloat.

I have children who are attending primary school. My fellow brothers also have school-aged children, so this work is very important to us. Even though we are faced with this crisis, we still have to work, to do something for our family to survive. We don't look at this crisis as a barrier. We are given different talents and we can create different things out of nothing.

We just need to get up, get out, and search for skills and life. Life is out there. If you want to get fish, go to the river or sea. If you want something from the garden, go out and plant. People need to invest in this rather than sit and wait for something to happen, or for government assistance to come.

As individuals and as the K9e Brothers, I can say that we are optimistic of better days ahead and we hope to one day turn our range of services into a thriving business that can sustain the livelihoods of our families throughout these days of hardship. —Adriu, Ba





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# The Land Has Sustained Us

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The outbreak of the current pandemic in Fiji signalled tough times ahead. We had seen major businesses in the Western Division shut down because of this pandemic, hundreds of people suddenly found themselves without jobs, and countless others had contracted the deadly virus or succumbed to it. For me, farming has been my safety net through the troubles brought on by COVID-19. Even at this age of 55, there is no such thing as retirement for farmers because the land is our bread and butter.

But it has been definitely difficult for many people in this area, and even in the Western Division as a whole. When the tourism sector took a dive, many people were left unemployed. They didn't have a job or means to earn a living, so it was really hard for them. Some carpenters were also laid off from work and are now venturing into sugar cane farming or are employed as labourers for the harvesting period. It's tough, but we do what we have to do to survive.

Even as the sugar cane *sadar* (leader) of the Veisaru Central Cane Farmers Cooperative, I have seen many negative impacts of COVID-19 on the farming community in the Western Division, particularly in Veisaru, Ba. When the cooperative was founded six years ago, cane farmers banded together to boost our harvest for better returns from the Fiji Sugar Corporation. There are 45 farmers in the cooperative and our earnings from cane farming go to supporting our families and sustaining our livelihood.

The current outbreak of COVID-19 limited our movements and delayed harvesting, which ultimately affected our income. The COVID-19 curfew and movement restrictions have also affected some businesses; shops are closed and even when they are open, it is not as busy as it was before the pandemic. Before, we would start harvesting cane in May, but this year we delayed it until July because of COVID-19. When we start late like that, it does affect income because money will come in late.

It also puts a lot of pressure on us because it's the rainy season, but we do our best to meet the demand from the Rarawai mill. There is no limit to the tonnes of cane we supply to the mill, and so far our normal supply would be 10,000 tonnes at a rate of \$60 per tonne. But there are other factors to consider, including costs associated with the supply like cartage fees, farming machinery, fertilisers, and labour.

Anyone who has gone into farming knows that it is labour-intensive work, but it keeps us fed and puts a roof over our head. It's true that some people are suffering because of job losses, but in a place like Fiji, a place like Ba, you can survive. You just need to work hard because when you work hard, when you work the land, you can feed yourself, you can feed your family. When you grow your own food, you save on expenses and you eat healthier, but you need to put in the sweat.

For those of us in a farming community like Veisaru, investing in the land is vital. We have tried to mitigate the challenges of COVID-19 by planting cassava, breadfruit, and assorted vegetables and root crops for our sustenance, and also as income from road sales. Many people save on paying rent and other expenses when they live off the land and within their means.

I do keep a few chickens around, as do some other families, but for us it's working the land to keep us fed, especially

during times of crisis such as this pandemic. Some people tend to forget about the benefits of farming, if not on a big scale, then at least for their own subsistence.

As a precautionary measure, I did not hesitate to get the Astra Zeneca vaccine. For me, it was a decision to keep my family and the community safe. When COVID-19 hit Fiji, I heard and read about people dying from the virus. That was enough for me to get vaccinated. My wife and son, who is an engineer, are vaccinated and so are the people who work with me at the cooperative.

In spite of the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on farming communities and industries in Fiji, I believe there are brighter days ahead. I just hope life will get better for those struggling because of the pandemic. —Ravindra, Ba



# A Paradise Despite the Pandemic

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S.P. Johnny is a local fisherman and hunter who has lived all of his life in the hills of Ngeremlengui, sharing a home with his mother, sister and brothers, and caring for his son. As the oldest son, it falls to S.P. to hold the household together and make sure everyone's basic needs are seen to.

His mother has a history of health issues, and in the past has needed to travel to Koror for treatment twice a week. The pandemic, however, saw the halt of many non-emergency health programs in Palau, and getting treatment for chronic ailments became more complicated. S.P. remembers that





when the borders closed due to COVID-19, the hospital canceled all the appointments without notice, “as if it's cheap to buy gas to drive to Koror only to tell us to go back home.”

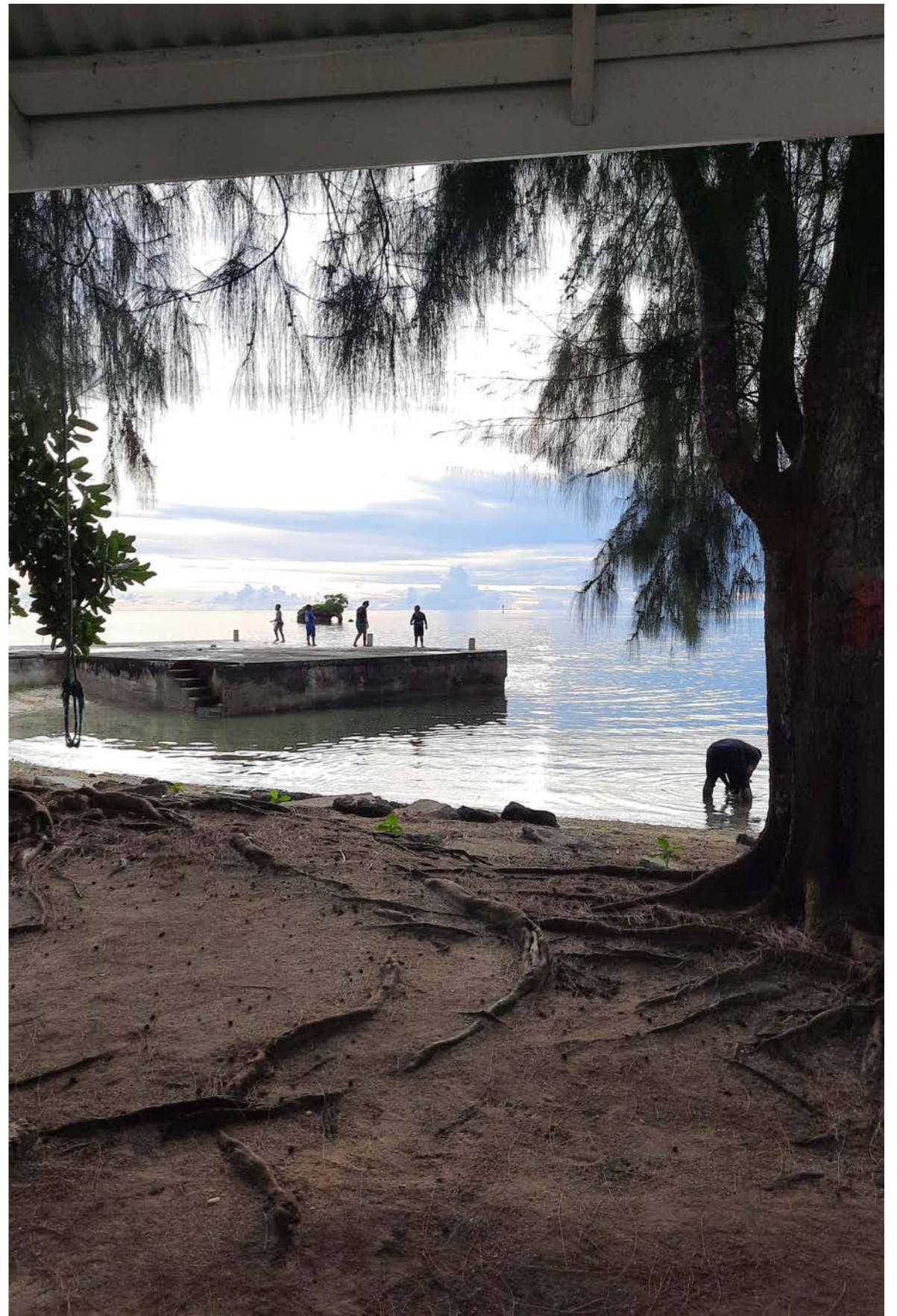
The beginning of the pandemic was an especially trying time for his family, in more ways than one. Before, S.P. would make weekly trips to Koror to sell his catch to the local restaurants and hotels for a good price. He was able to support himself and his son, and help out with household expenses. When the pandemic was declared, international travels stopped and the once booming tourist market came to an abrupt halt. The fallout was immediate, he explains. “Before COVID-19, I made more than one trip to Koror a week. Now I'm lucky if I go more than once a month.” With a nonexistent tourism market, customers are hard to come by, especially for seafood.

Although the Palauan government has received aid funds from the United States to support the economic recovery of those most affected by the pandemic, S.P. wasn't unable to benefit from this program as he was conducting his trade informally, not as a registered business.

S.P. felt that government programs like the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act only benefitted the tourism companies and left behind those making a living independently, like fishermen and hunters who do not have formal employment.

As often great resilience comes from great hardship, S.P. has found creative ways to make up for the financial loss. He has turned to using more local foods in his family's diet instead of expensive imported items, and has planted a few taro plants in his backyard alongside his mother's fruit trees. “Those are our snacks,” he says, “better than spending \$5 at the store when you get hungry, you just walk outside and you can pick which one do you want, all free of charge.”

Despite the ongoing struggle to cope with the effects of the pandemic, the 36-year old queer man remains optimistic and has a strong sense of belonging to his native lands—this is where he wants to be. For him, the soft rolling hills of Ngeremlengui are nothing less than the paradise everyone else in the world is dreaming about.





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# Leadership Forged in Hardship

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After completing his education abroad, Blodak moved back to Kayangel, the northernmost state in Palau, a couple of years ago. Born and raised here, he enjoys the slow, simple life of living on the outer islands. He says that was always the plan—to return home and make a difference. He found a job as a public employee, but the bureaucracy proved too much in that role. “I felt like I wasn't having the impact I could, and it was frustrating,” he said. When the COVID-19 pandemic first hit, Kayangel closed its border, and there were no trips to or from Kayangel to the main island. “I couldn't go home. I

missed it and I worried constantly,” he said, but the peace of mind of a closed border was enough to give him the strength of patience. “It was a protective move. If COVID came, the island would still be safe.”

Blodak knew he had to channel his desire to help into something productive. To help his home state navigate the crisis, he joined a humanitarian non-governmental organization as the head of disaster response. He held COVID-19 preparation trainings with local leaders at the state level around Babeldaob and distributed hygiene kits in the communities, going door to door. This helped him get a deeper understanding of the issues faced by rural communities. “There were places where the tap water wasn't considered potable,” he recalls.

Working in the field and seeing the struggles of the most vulnerable in the community had a profound effect on the young man. When his work contract ended, he decided to run for Senate as a write-in candidate in the 2020 congressional elections, to bring more visibility to the issues that he identified. He started his campaign in Kayangel, where he went house to house talking about the need for government reform and transparency. His election platform resonated with people and in November 2020 over 500 people wrote-in his name for the Palau Senate. “I was so surprised so many people remembered how to spell my name!” he remembers.

After the last elections, Blodak returned to Babeldaob to distribute emergency equipment. The ongoing need for support for a community that has been in “the government's blind spot,” and the high number of votes he received in his trial run for public office, have encouraged him to run again in earnest in 2024.

In late December 2020, he moved back to Kayangel where he worked as a kindergarten teacher for a while. “I had one student, and I learned so much from him,” he says, remaining always positive and smiling. He has an easy-going personality with a positive outlook that is instantly likeable.

Now, Blodak has just started a new job as principal of the elementary school in Kayangel. He feels a strong sense of responsibility, and he accepted the job, as filling this kind of position is difficult due to the limited number of qualified candidates. Plus, he is confident that it will help advance his professional career.

Looking back at the last 18 months, the pandemic has been both a scary experience, but also an opportunity for Blodak. From a place of uncertainty, new circumstances opened doors and opportunities he wouldn't have considered otherwise. Despite his growing success and reputation, his conclusive remarks show he remains humble, grateful, and down to earth, “In the end I wouldn't change things, we're lucky, protected here. It's the best place to be.”



## An Economic Lifesaver

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Marlene is a 31-year-old woman from Ngiwal State. She is a proud mother of two, ages 10 and 5, and is currently employed in the resource and environmental conservation sector. She would prefer to do more field work, like patrolling the designated protected area, but as the only woman in the office, she is usually relegated to desk duty. Marlene came to live in Ngiwal with her parents after experiencing marital issues with the father of her children, who has since relocated to the United States. Since then, both of her parents passed away, and she and her children have moved around more than once,

living with relatives. She had planned on leaving Palau to join the father of her children, but the pandemic has drastically hindered those plans.

In addition to putting travels on hold, COVID-19 affected her ability to make an income. Her old job had been included in a government program that facilitated agreements between state administration offices, local farmers, and taro patch owners. As part of this agreement, the state would lend money to public sector workers to cultivate their farms in exchange for a share of the crops. “They put me to work in the taro patches because I’m a girl and cultivating the taro patches is women’s work,” she laughs, “but I can tell you I change tires faster than any of those men, and they know it!”

The arrangement worked well for years, but when the borders closed due to the pandemic, tourism also stopped, affecting the demand for local produce. Public funding for such mutually beneficial initiatives was affected, too. Soon after, Marlene was furloughed and had to turn to family to help make ends meet and provide for her children. Their father had been helping with their day-to-day expenses, but when the pandemic hit the United States, he was temporarily laid off and was similarly unable to provide support for the children.

After months of struggling came a welcome relief—Marlene was able to benefit from the Palau government’s pandemic economic support program.

The program was administered through the Palau Visitors' Authority (PVA), which worked with affected entities to provide salary compensation for people whose employers could not afford to pay them in the economic downturn. "The PVA program was a life saver," Marlene remembers.

Additionally, in January 2021, the new State Administration conducted a significant reallocation of public employees. Marlene was transferred to her current job in the environmental protection sector, which she enjoys, especially driving the boat.

Marlene plans to send her older child, aged 10, to his father in the United States, before the start of the school year, hoping that this heartbreaking separation would set him up for a better future. "I will miss him, and my heart hurts to think about it, but it's for the best, and the experience will be good for him in the long run," it's how she justified her decision. She also hopes to be able to join them with their younger child in the near future, and is saving up for the move.



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# Seeking Brighter Days

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Tuchoi is 42 and a mother of four, living and working in the State of Melekeok. As her children are old enough now to “take care of themselves,” she finally felt free to end a tumultuous and “one-sided” marriage and got divorced recently.

An accident she suffered a few years ago in her home state left her left hand partially paralyzed. She remembers that ordeal as the single event that impacted her life the most, leaving her wondering if she would ever be able to use her

hand again. A slow and difficult recovery affected her mental health, and she soon fell into a depression that had her isolated in the home for over a year. Moving to a new town and landing a good job two years ago seemed like life was going back to normal. She made friends at work, started an inter-office fitness group, and spent more time with friends.

When the pandemic hit, however, the state government, like most other states in Palau, drastically reduced their staff's hours in an effort to avoid mass furloughs similar to those happening in the private sector. Because she was still on the payroll, Tuchoi did not qualify for any of the government assistance programs; this created an income gap in her family budget that she could not cover. Money issues led to increased tension and problems in the home. Tuchoi spent several months in a constant state of stress, unable to make ends meet, and becoming more and more in debt. Eventually, her marriage broke down and she got divorced.

However, things are beginning to look up again for Tuchoi. Reflecting on the past year, she noted that she was happy to leave all the stress behind, and she is contemplating moving back to her home state and looking for a job there. Thinking back on her recent experience during the pandemic, she realizes her struggles were not unique. If she could pass a message to the government, she would “tell our leaders that there are many people, out of the public eye, who they forget when they make their government programs.”



# Plant Your Love and Let it Grow

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Klem Crosby has a well-known green thumb. She started her own floral arrangements business a few years ago, making arrangements for funerals and other functions, and has been contracted to decorate stages for large governmental events, such as last year's Pacific Islands Forum meeting held in Palau. This 22-year-old transgender woman from the Ngerbeched Hamlet of Koror State and Imul Hamlet of Aimeliik has seen her business flourish, and she is showered with support by her local community.

The support she has now is belied by her troubled past. As a child, and into her high school years, she stayed with relatives, moving back and forth between her mother's and her father's families, as both her parents were away at the time. She didn't feel accepted in either household, and felt unwanted by her parents.

She remembers with sadness, "When I was younger, my father refused to accept me, and always sent me boy clothes from the United States. I would cry whenever I would get a package, even before opening it, because I knew it was not something that I'd want. I didn't find any understanding in the home, either. My relatives that I was living with would also taunt me, call me bad names, and try to make me man up."

Because of the lack of support from her family, Klem never finished high school, but found solace and guidance from friends, especially older, accomplished women who encouraged her to embrace her identity as a trans woman. Her new support group often took Klem out, treating her as one of them, getting nails and hair done, and eventually encouraged her to start her business.

It was one of these women, Klem relates, that first offered her garden for Klem to cultivate and start her business. But it was Klem's grandmother, who she calls *mom*, who instilled in her the love for gardening.





She recalls, “My *mom* loved her garden and taught me to love it too, before she left to live with her daughter in Washington.” As her customers are on the island, the pandemic hasn’t affected Klem’s life significantly. She has not experienced the economic uncertainty that has concerned others in the community, and when work is not busy, she enjoys taking time for herself.

But despite support from friends and the creative nature of her business, Klem’s life is all not smooth sailing—she is currently serving five months in prison for assault. She confesses losing her temper when she is confronted about her identity, saying “People look at me and judge me... it makes me angry.” One night, an unsavory remark led to a physical confrontation, which ended in assault charges and a jail

sentence, of which she has served three months already. Even though the government does not recognize LGBTQI+ individuals and non-binary gender identities, she appreciates being treated as her true gender in prison, noting, “I am just happy that I was put with the female population, there were only two of us there.”

Klem says that given the chance, she would ask that the government put more focus into policies that accept and embrace the gender spectrum, so that individuals such as herself can get the kind of specialized healthcare they need.



## Hope on the Horizon

Cleo is a 22-year-old genderqueer person who grew up on the outlying island of Peleliu. As a teenager, she moved to Koror, where the only public high school in Palau is located. During her senior year in high school she basically lived on her own, “on Ramen noodles and grilled cheese sandwiches,” but she remembers fondly her “home-alone” stint.

When the pandemic first hit, Cleo had an office job in a public institution. The job was not challenging enough to keep her interest and she left after just a few months, making plans to leave the country.





She dreams of going somewhere where she could start fresh and feel more accepted. In her view, it is hard to be a young person that does not conform to social norms in Palau. “If I could choose, I wouldn’t want to be a woman. If I could, I would be a man,” she explains, but she also reassures me that the lack of social acceptance doesn’t really bother her.

What marked her profoundly, though, was the loss of her brother in July 2020, in a car accident. For her, this tragic event is a testimony of the government falling short of providing opportunities for young people to learn a trade or apply their time usefully, which makes them instead vulnerable to turning to alcohol and substance use.

“Books and school aren't for everyone, some people are better at hands-on learning, at working with their hands, tinkering.” But she feels that the Palauan government is too focused on promoting higher education, while those who can't or don't want to pursue a university degree are sentenced to work for stagnant wages and a shrinking dream of escaping poverty.

She has no answers for how the government can address this issue, but she is frustrated with the lack of listening and understanding by those in power. Right now, she says, the only answer is to go off island, make it there, then bring the success back home. To save up for her planned move, she has started taking casual work and doing odd jobs, and she claims that she actually makes more money this way than at her old job.

“I'm going to go [to Alaska], just for a year. And when I make it, I'll come back and take everyone back with me.” Cleo has high hopes for her upcoming move to the United States. She has heard of opportunities and freedoms for people like her to do what they love and enjoy without judgment. When asked what it is she plans on doing exactly, she just smiles mysteriously. “I don't have a plan except to go and live my life, and make it!”



# Embracing Tradition and a New Path Forward

Tellei is a 30-year-old transgender woman from Angaur State. Her office day job requires her to travel from Angaur to the main island of Koror regularly. When Palau closed its borders due to COVID-19, Tellei started spending more and more time in Koror, and says that it's both a place where she can be herself without judgment, but also a place where she sometimes feels rejected due to her gender identity.

While she enjoys life in Koror, surrounded by loving and supporting friends and family, she admits her heart will always call her back to Angaur.



“Those who spread rumors and bad stories are insecure in their own selves, and we should feel sorry for them instead of being intimidated by their small behavior. They don't shelter me, or feed me, and I don't need anything from them,” she explains.

Tellei shrugs off others' negativity and refuses to let it impact her daily life or take away her happiness. Furthermore, she tries to instill this resilience in other members of the LGBTQI+ community in Palau who might be struggling with the lack of social acceptance.

She doesn't expect much support from the government, either, just to “at least recognize my existence.” Currently, the Palau government has no official language to address gender identities that do not conform to the traditional male-female binary, so she feels like she is in limbo as to her official legal status.

For Tellei, the pandemic has presented the opportunity she had been dreaming of to explore her talents and hobbies. And now she turning her hobby into a profession, and making a name for herself as a talented stylist. “I've always liked styling hair, ever since I was little.”

When women asked me to do their hair for the *omengat* [traditional Palauan motherhood ceremony], I was very excited,” she recalls. Ever since her first *omengat*, she finds

herself highly sought after for these traditional occasions and it's more than just a hobby—it's an added source of income during the economic downturn caused by the pandemic.

The hair styles she specializes in are delicate buns decorated with the floral symbol of young mother's clan woven into the hair. She enjoys the challenge of styling different hair types and lengths.

Her skills are bringing her increasing recognition in the traditional women's circles, which she finds immensely enjoyable. In fact, at the last two *omengat* she has attended, she has been pulled up on stage to sing, another of her hidden talents.

Overall, Tellei is happy with her newfound life. Government decisions or policy are not something she tends to follow closely, although she did vote in the last elections for the president because he expressed his support for equal rights. “I believe what he said. He just began [his term], so I think we give him more time to see what he does. Give him a chance,” concludes Tellei, remaining optimistic. Her positive outlook on life is infectious.







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# The Personal Costs of Social Isolation

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Prior to COVID-19, life was already difficult for Oriana, a twenty-one-year-old transgender man. “Being a transgender man is not easy. Samoans are generally accepting of transgender women, however, people like me are still an oddity. We are stared at, ridiculed and abused—even at home.” A typical day for Oriana includes morning chores, such as making breakfast for his parents and then going into the local market to help his cousins sell their produce. From 9:00 am to 4:00 pm, Oriana enjoys the hustle and bustle amongst other vendors and customers.

“When I am away from home, I’m free. I don’t have to go with my mother to any village activities. I don’t have to endure listening to the village women talk about me as if I were not sitting right next to them. They are always picking on my clothes, my boy-styled haircut, and unmarried status.”

However, when COVID-19 spread throughout the world and Samoa entered into a State of Emergency (SoE) that demanded the closing down of public places and public transport, Oriana found himself stranded in hell. “When the SoE was in place, I had no choice but to stay home. It was unbearable, every day I felt like a part of me was dying. I was suffering and everyone else around me were as well.”

Oriana’s family earn money from selling the produce from their plantation. They live from day to day, upon whatever they make at the market. With the lockdown, their livelihood was diminished. “My parents became extremely depressed. I recall my mother crying one day because COVID-19 was coming, but we didn’t have any face masks to protect ourselves. She kept talking about death. On the other hand, my father drowned himself in kava every day. This became a constant arguing point between him and my mother. I hated it.” Oriana smiles sadly as he talks about taking his younger siblings to his aunt’s house close by, whenever the arguments escalated and became a physical confrontation between the parents. “It happened often. They were never like that before.

I guess because each person had their own space and there were activities that kept them occupied. But now, it was just ugly. They would throw things at each other. Sometimes my father would slap my mum, or my mum would hit my father. There was no use trying to stop them, you just end up getting hurt too.”

Oriana shows me a scar above his ankle, injured by a shattered plate thrown at him during one of the many fights. “I don’t try to intervene anymore. I just grab my siblings and leave. It is not the physical pain that gets to me, but the words. The things they say to each other and the things screamed at me are the things that hurt the most. My mother during one of their fights said that I am a ‘sin’ and that’s why the disease was coming.”

One of the greatest difficulties during those times was not being able to talk to his best friend, Tui, who was stuck overseas in New Zealand. “My friend is the person I usually confide in and she is also the one who has always encouraged me to be strong whenever I am struggling with my identity. Not being able to see and talk to her was devastating. I don’t have anyone else. People like me have very few people who can understand us.”

Initially able to keep in contact online, the friends were unable to do so when Oriana did not have enough money to buy credit for his phone. Sometimes, he would beg his

cousins to use their phones just to send a text to his friend. “Sometimes, when I am using someone else’s phone and I am only allowed one text, my friend would reply to me with one word, ‘Pray’ and I would. I honestly don’t think I have ever prayed so hard in my life.”

When asked what could have been done to help him through COVID-19, he immediately replied, “I think free calling and data minutes during the SoE would have been a great assistance for everyone. You feel so lonely sometimes, you just want to go online for moral support or even just to watch a movie or TikTok so you can laugh and forget about the problems around you. Oh, it would have been great if the government would have provided free electricity, too. You find your mind in a dark place at times and it does not help that you find yourself literally sitting in the dark some nights because we simply did not have enough money to buy power.”

Since February 2021, the SoE in Samoa has eased up and things have improved at home for Oriana. “My parents don’t fight as much. I am back to the market and everyone is doing their own thing. Dad still drinks kava now and again, but rarely at home. My mother has started saving money now, but very little because market sales are not as good as before COVID-19. Oh, we also have face masks at home from Samoa Victim Support Group. It’s not perfect but it’s better.”





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## It Made Me Cry to See My Mum Cry

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During COVID-19 lockdowns, school closures, and mandatory curfews, women and children struggled to escape and seek protection from violence, particularly when their perpetrators were family members living with them in the same household. Samoa Victim Support Group (SVSG) received a substantial increase of reports of domestic violence from November 2019 to August 2020, when the State of Emergency orders were strictly monitored. Tavita, a nine-year-old boy, and his 38-year-old mother Sara, sit across from me at the SVSG Headquarters. It is their second visit

here. Their first time at the organization was last year, when they had secretly left their home to seek refuge and assistance. “I still clearly remember coming here with my mum that first time. We had to walk for a long time from our house because we did not have any bus fare. My mother pretended to my father that we were going outside to do gardening, but we did not. She told me to be quiet and to walk quickly,” recalls Tavita. They arrived at SVSG dusty, exhausted, but relieved to have made it unnoticed.

Since Sara’s husband was laid off work from a local resort in April, things had been extremely difficult at home. It was not the first time Sara had been subjected to physical abuse by her husband; however, beatings were becoming more frequent, and this had been the worst so far. “He has become very short-tempered, much more than usual. Before, it was only when he was drunk and if something antagonized him that he became violent. But now, everything and anything is a trigger. It was especially sad when my son got a hiding for no reason or over very minor things, like spilling water or not answering a question quickly. I knew we had to get away,” explains Sara.

Sara was living with her husband’s family. She did not have a job, but stayed at home and cared for her in-laws. “I couldn’t ask them for help. They have never helped before. They are very traditional and think that our problems are our own private matters.

Sometimes, my husband and I argue because of them. When my husband lost his job because of COVID-19, everything wrong became my fault.” Sara found herself the scapegoat for the family’s money problems and associated feelings of frustration and depression. She was blamed for not being employed, failing to budget their money, and for bringing bad luck.

Tavita interjects with his personal account of things. “My mother cried a lot. She cried because of my father and our other relatives. It made me cry to see her cry. One time, she cried because they were unhappy with her cooking but she couldn’t make anything nice because we didn’t have any more money to buy nice things.”

When asked what part of staying home he liked and disliked he replies, “I liked not having to go to school, but then I was unhappy that I didn’t get to see any of my friends. I was lonely and sad. I also didn’t like that my father was home because they always fight. I was always getting into trouble with him.”

At SVSG, Sara and her son received medical attention and were able to contact her relatives, who immediately came for them. When asked about what advice they would give to others in similar situation, Sara said, “COVID-19 is not anyone’s fault, everyone is experiencing difficulties, its effects are not isolated on a single individual or family, so do not

blame each other. Try and work through it peacefully, [but] if you cannot, leave. Seek help if you are in trouble, do not be ashamed. We all have good times and bad times in this life. If you are a mother, like myself, protect your kids, even if sometimes it is from your own family.” Sara and Tavita now live with Sara’s sister. Her husband is undertaking anger management classes with SVSG. They are no longer together.



# From Urban Life to Farming—A Tale of Togetherness

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My name is Sina, and I am 24 years old, single, and currently unemployed. The impact of COVID-19 on my family and myself was extremely hard. Before the pandemic, my parents and I ran a small business at the market. We had a few stalls selling handicrafts, clothes, and Samoan souvenirs—all catering to and targeting tourists. Our business is my parents' hard work; they have been operating it for more than 15 years and it was successful. My parents put my siblings and I through school from money earned through their business.

They started off from very humble beginnings, as street vendors, and gradually they saved up money to pay for a stall at the market. They diversified their products, focusing on printing shirts and sarongs for tourists. It was a good and steady source of income.

In early 2020, when the government closed off our borders to international travellers, our family was immediately affected. To this day, I still cannot believe that the business my family had built for 15 years was wiped out of existence just about three months into the closure! “COVID-19 not only kills people, it also kills dreams and hard work!”—I remember my mother saying to me on our last day, at our market stall, as we packed up.

I recalled looking around and seeing a few of my fellow stall vendors. Their facial expressions, as they sat amongst their wares without a potential buyer in sight, mirrored the feelings of hopelessness inside me. The market was flooded with unbought goods.

By the time our family had closed shop, our savings were already used up. We lived within the urban area and our house was on freehold land that was mortgaged to the bank. The loss of our business led to the loss of our home. It was simply devastating. Unlike countries where the government issued an eviction moratorium, the Samoan Government did not issue any similar assistance.

The government, as part of their support measures, had paid 2 percent of the total interest on any and all loans with every commercial bank for months. This meant that the interest charged on our mortgage was reduced for three months from 9 percent to 7 percent. However, it did not solve our issue of having absolutely nothing for our repayments. When our arrears continued to increase, my parents decided to let go of the house. Our overseas relatives took over the mortgage and possession of the house. We were displaced physically and emotionally.

During our trials, my father was the one that held our family together. He kept telling us that things would be fine. That we could rebuild and start another business again, but what was important was that we were safe, unlike other people overseas who were dying in hospitals alone. Sometimes his words were like a soothing balm and other times they fell on deaf ears. I understood the logic in his words, but it was just so hard. I looked around and saw that there were people much more established than us and they were struggling just as bad. Hotels ceased operations, car rentals sold off their vehicles, restaurants closed down, private offices cut back on work hours—businesses were dying.

In November 2020, our family moved back to my father's village to live with our extended family. I felt like a refugee. I was always proud of being the "city girl" amongst my cousins. Whenever our relatives came to town from the rural villages

or the outer islands, they would stay with us. We were the center of our extended family. We were seen as the "wealthy" branch of our family. It was humbling going back to your roots. Initially, my siblings and I found it difficult to adjust, since we had to share everything with my dozen or so cousins. However, eventually, we managed to cope with these changes. The greatest thing about our relocation was that my parents found the moral support they needed. My uncle said to my father one day, "Tatou matitiva faafesaga'i," which translates to "Let's be poor together." It is a saying that emphasizes the importance of being together over being rich but alone. Whenever I see my mother smile now and laugh with my aunts, I recall my uncle's words and feel the truth in it. My parents are not stressed as they were. Our burdens are shared with others.

My parents work the land now. We are not starving, as the land and sea provide abundantly. This is much better than before when we were stressing over not having money to buy food stuff from the store. I only wish that the government could have done more to assist its people by ensuring or providing some formal social protection system in our country. The only existing form of social protection is the Senior Citizen Benefit Scheme. My parents do not even qualify under this scheme as they have not reached the age of 65. The lack of social protection for young children and unemployed people—measures implemented by other countries such as New Zealand and Australia—has significantly worsened the impact of COVID-19 in Samoa.



# Thirteen Going on Thirty

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It is, without a doubt, that the effects of COVID-19 are taking a devastating toll on millions of people around the world. Children and youth are commonly among the most affected population. While others are safe and secure in their homes with caring family and friends, for other young people it is a harsh and cruel reality. They are forced to step up as adults in order to survive. Tupe Manaia is a 13-year-old boy and currently a child street vendor. It is not an unusual sight around the capital of Apia; however, it is a new experience for Tupe. Prior to the pandemic, Tupe attended primary school

and was in the eighth grade. He was dreaming of being a sailor, to travel around the world and see all the places shown on TV. However, Tupe's dreams have been disrupted, as he is no longer in school although schools have reopened. "My parents think it is more useful to my family if I earn a living than go to school."

"While COVID-19 shut down Samoa, street vendors like my parents were banned by the government from working. So they all stayed home. We had to beg people around our neighborhood for food and money just to get by each day. Some days, we would go to the rubbish dump and look for useful things from there." Tupe has adjusted quickly to his new norm, as he says, "this is what my parents did, so I am used to it in a way. It is embarrassing though when sometimes I see children from my school. I usually hide or ignore them. I don't think I want to go back to school."

"If I have to sell matches, cotton buds, and chips in order to avoid begging for money, I would rather do this." When asked if his family has tried to seek help from the government or any other organization, Tupe said no. "I don't think the government gives that sort of help to people. They don't give free money. The police usually just come and chase us off the street or tell our parents off for making us work, but, that's it." When asked about any challenges in his family besides their financial struggles, Tupe laughs and tells me about how they did not have access to any personal protective gear.





“The store we went to one day to buy bread for dinner, you cannot enter if you do not have a mask. My father could not afford to spend the little money we had on a mask, so he actually took a shirt and tied it around his face like a ninja just to get into the store. It was funny, but when my sister got sick and we did not have money to see the doctor or buy medicine, it was not funny.” Tupe’s younger sister Ana is four

years old and contracted chicken pox during the State of Emergency lockdown. “It was bad because at that time my parents had not been working. So, we did not have any money. The neighbors also could not lend us anymore money as we owed them too much. Luckily, my aunt is knowledgeable with some traditional healing methods, and she used different plant leaves, herbs, and oil to rub on my

sister's body. My aunt was the one who bathed my sister and cared for her for many days until she was better.”

Things will likely remain unchanged for Tupe and his family for the foreseeable future, until there is significant assistance rendered to them. Unfortunately, he is just one of the many intelligent children who dropped out of school during this pandemic.



## Dreams on Hold

Early morning before sunrise, Ava, a 20-year-old *faafafine* (transgender woman) from a rural district in Samoa is already on the bus heading into the capital. With sleepy eyes and an empty stomach, she endures an hour-and-a-half ride just to get to work. I sit next to her and enjoy the morning air. “I was supposed to go on scholarship overseas this year but because of COVID-19 and the travel restrictions, I’m stuck in Samoa.” Ava cries as she tells about the disappointment of not being able to commence her university studies this year.

“I worked so hard to get that scholarship, no one thought that someone like me from the bush would get a scholarship or even graduate! My family was so happy. I am the first in my family to complete high school. Having to wait until borders open in order to go to university has been so disheartening.”

While options of commencing studies online are open to scholarship students like Ava, the issue is access. “The Internet is not cheap, and the connectivity is problematic in our village. Our laptop is quirky and it is shared amongst three of my siblings, plus my cousins next door. I would like to start my studies now but there are just too many technical difficulties. I would rather wait than start online and end up failing.”

So, to await studies, but mostly in order to help out her family, Ava has found herself a part-time job at an office. “No one in my family is employed, we live off the land. We grow taro, kava, tobacco, and vegetables. Since the pandemic, our family’s income has basically diminished. We used to sell our taro to local exporters, however, now there are very few shipments overseas. No one is buying. I have no choice but to find a job.”

Ava talks about struggling to secure employment with no prior work experience and no degree. She had applied to eight jobs or so, ranging from cleaner to office clerk.

“I wish the government or the local university would look into this, offer some support to students like me through some form of work internship. Help us build our career. Keep us interested in studying. I applied to be a cleaner, and during the interview they asked me about prior work experience.” All her job applications had been unsuccessful; her current job as a receptionist was secured through a relative.

Although the pay is low, that is, approximately 110 Samoan Tala (USD 44) per week, Ava is grateful. “My family is really desperate right now. Meals have become cooked taro with tea every day. I can’t even remember the last time we had meat. It is too expensive. My younger sister is no longer in school, my parents cannot afford her school fees. It’s also a mess at home, my parents are depressed and I hate seeing that. They continue to work our plantation, but I know they think it futile sometimes because it’s not earning any money to pay for the things we need.”

One of the biggest challenges for students like Ava is remaining interested in pursuing further studies at all. “I feel like giving up on my dreams, our travel plans have been postponed twice now since I was informed of the scholarship award, in 2020. My studies seem insignificant compared to being able to help out my family. I am the eldest child and the only one with any chance of securing employment.”

Ava said that although the local restrictions have eased, her parents remain depressed and discouraged. “I know a significant part of their unhappiness is because I am unable to go overseas for school. My scholarship is the symbol of their sacrifices and hopes for a better life for our family. That is all on hold now. I hope that the government and our sponsors will consider allowing us to travel despite the pandemic. It is very unfair as people with dual citizenship are still travelling back and forth. Even one of the rugby teams went recently for a tournament. So, why can’t we students?”

When she reaches her destination, Ava gets off and waves goodbye to me with a determined look on her face, calling, “Sis, call me please if you need a babysitter after hours.”



# The Hard Road to a Family's Economic Recovery

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In March 2020, when the Samoan government imposed travel restrictions and local curfews to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the economic impact was especially hard on rural families. Mina, a mother of five children, smiles with tears in her eyes as she tells of her family's journey, which started when her husband was laid off from work. Toma, her husband, was the sole breadwinner of the family. He worked as a laborer for a local construction company. "We didn't have much, but, we were provided for. Besides my husband's salary, we received money from relatives overseas.

We had enough for decent meals every day and, most importantly, to cover our biggest expense: our kids' school fees, lunches and bus fares. We were content."

However, when her husband lost his job, Mina and her usually harmonious family became riddled with stress and unhappiness. Arguments about money, "not having enough," and "finding a job" became the plot of most conversations between the couple. "I kept nagging and nagging him about getting a job. He tried so hard, I just couldn't accept that the situation was so bad generally in Samoa that no one would hire him." Toma applied everywhere for employment and took on any task he could find. "One day, my husband even joined a fishing expedition undertaken by another family at our village. He had never gone fishing before in his life! He had absolutely no idea what he was doing. But we had no choice. We had to adapt for our children's sake."

As the months progressed and there seemed to be no hope with COVID-19 abating from the world, Mina realized it was time for her to also step out of her comfort zone. Never having been employed herself, she started looking for a job. "Whether it was 10 Samoan Tala (USD 4) for a day's labor, I didn't care. I just needed to have money so that our kids would have lunch for school." One day Mina found herself hulling sacks of sand amongst a group of men at a neighbour's front yard for cash. "I was the only woman there. Side by side with the men, shovelling sand and carrying loads for the neighbors' building project.

I just wanted to get paid. I was too desperate to be embarrassed.” No matter how hard the job, if at the end of the day Mina and her husband had made at least \$10, they were grateful. “We tried to hide our financial struggles from our children, especially our eldest and second child. We didn’t want their minds to be burdened by our poverty. We wanted them to be children, be happy, and just focus on school.” However, despite their efforts, Mina’s older children, who are 15 and 14 years old, became aware of their family’s situation. The two children are both in high school, and would sometimes return home with their lunch money unused. “After school, my children would come and say ‘Mum, here. I didn’t use it. It’s ok, I don’t need lunch.’ As a parent, it was heartbreaking when they did that.”

Mina regrets leaving school early. “I told my kids, excel at school because if your father and I had had a better education, we wouldn’t be in this situation. People with office jobs, working for the government, are still employed. Laborers like your father were the first to get the axe at work.” Their family struggle during COVID-19 has become a drive to ensure her children complete their education. Every night after prayers and dinner, both she and Toma help their children with school work. It is a new norm for them.

The financial struggles experienced by Mina were also echoed by her relatives and friends, locally and abroad. “Our families overseas were not able to send us money anymore. Relatives in

New Zealand and the U.S.A. who regularly sent us money for school fees and village activities, also lost their jobs. It was understandable, COVID was everywhere.” Despite their struggles, she knows that at least for her family here in Samoa, they are safe as COVID-19 has not reached Samoan shores. “It was good the government immediately called a State of Emergency and closed off international travel. I just wish they had some benefits or assistance for families like ours. The government seems to be focusing on saving businesses like hotels and resorts. How about us everyday people?”

Mina also expressed her disappointment that while the government had imposed restrictions on public gatherings such as funerals and weddings, village councils did not take the opportunity to alleviate financial strife. “In our village, we had a few funerals during the state of emergency lockdowns, and our village chiefs still demanded families to make their usual monetary contributions for the funerals. If a family failed to make their contribution, they would be penalized. So many families like mine, although we couldn’t afford it, still continued to do so.”

Things are slowly looking up for Mina and Toma’s family. Besides doing odd jobs around the village, they have started to work the land. “We have some land that had remained unutilized, we have gone back to farming it. Taro and vegetables. It’s good, things may not be as good or as easy as before, but we are alive, in good health, and have each other.”



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## A Plea for Empathy

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I'm Susana and my son is Aaron. Aaron is eight years old and he has moderate autism. Autism in Samoa is not something that is widely understood by people, or even by teachers. Aaron attended a mainstream kindergarten in Samoa when he was four years old, and a few months into the school year the teachers complained to me that there was something wrong with him. They said, "Aaron cries when the other students are noisy," "he does not play with the other children," and "he talks gibberish." Those were things we had also noticed at home, but we assumed that he would grow out

of it. However, Aaron never grew out of it and now he attends a school for children with special needs. His daily routine consists of having breakfast and then catching the bus to school. There is a designated school bus that picks him up directly from our house and also drops him off after school. Aaron loves going on the bus. Our family does not have a car, so this is the only opportunity for Aaron to ride a car. He is at a school with children with similar disabilities and everyone accepts his quirky ways.

When COVID-19 resulted in school closures in Samoa, it was hard on everyone in my family, but especially for Aaron. Due to his intellectual disability, trying to explain to him why he could not go to school was extremely challenging. My son took it as we were punishing him. He would throw tantrums, beg, and cry to us, "school, school, bus." He would point out to the door to the spot where I would usually stand with him to wait for the bus. For my husband and me, it was very frustrating not being able to make him understand. But we imagined that while it was frustrating for us, to our son it must be lonely and scary. He is stuck at home with siblings who don't play with him and adults who can't understand his signing.

During school closures, the government conducted classes for students through television broadcasts. This was helpful for my other son, but when it came to Aaron it was useless.



His school did give us a toolkit with activity sheets and a flash drive loaded with video clips of his teachers conducting lessons, but this appeased him only temporarily. My son struggled to relate through a screen. He needed to interact with his teachers directly or on a more personal level. One day when his father and I could not handle Aaron and his crying, we called my sister and she came and took him out for

a ride. When we passed his school, he said “please, please.” We tried to make him understand that it was closed but he did not. When we took him out of the house to the supermarket in an attempt to make him happy, Aaron refused to abide by the COVID-19 social distancing rules. Firstly, he hated wearing a mask on his face—it was worse because all the masks available were for adults.



No one provided children-sized masks and I have absolutely no idea why. Aaron did not understand standing six feet away from other people, he would walk up to a random stranger in the queue and hug them. We found ourselves apologizing again and again. Some people found it funny, while others were very unkind. It was like COVID-19 came and made everyone paranoid. In some instances I wanted to say to them, “Excuse me, COVID-19 is not in Samoa yet, and there is really no need for you to be angry at a child.”

Thinking retrospectively about the challenges in the early stages of the state of emergency lockdowns, I think it could have been managed better by everyone. Personally, I believe children’s education is a priority and should always remain as such. There is no support for parents of disabled children and for children with disabilities like my son. All they have is school. The difficulty arises because these schools do not incorporate virtual or online methods of teaching, hence, their students are unfamiliar with it. As a consequence, students with disabilities, like Aaron, miss out on significant development milestones.

It is worse for students who are from low-income families like ours. We cannot afford to buy our children a tablet for virtual learning even if online classes were offered by his school. The government should make access to education possible for all children within Samoa at all times. Teachers at such schools

like my son’s should be given special support that enable them to be there for their students despite lockdowns.

In order to help Aaron and to better prepare, my husband and I have invested in a cheap phone for Aaron to use. We want him to be familiar with learning online and not to feel more confined than he already is by being around people who are different from him.



# Overcoming Grief through Faith

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My name is Hardy Leo, and I am from Pentecost—a beautiful island in Vanuatu well known for the cultural ceremony of “land diving.” I am 63 and I have four children, including an adopted son. My two daughters and sons are already grown-ups and they have decided to move out and begin their journey of life without me. So here’s my story. Before getting involved in my current business, I was working as a football coach for the Siaraka football club. After three years of

coaching, I decided to stop because of financial issues. I always had a strong belief in custom and tradition, and these values have always been a part of my livelihood right from when I was as a young boy. Since custom and tradition were so valuable then, I said to myself, “Why not use my custom and culture as a way to earn money?”

In 1985, I opened a small artefact shop inside the Centre Point Building in Port Vila. At that time, I was doing only painting and picture framing as my artefacts business. Yet, I felt like I needed to do more even though the business was doing well. So, I started to travel from island to island, buying local artefacts from locals for sale. I discovered that not all artefacts could be sold. Some artefacts were restricted from sale, so I used them for showcases or displays. This attracted more tourists. What makes it so interesting is that these artefacts are from different islands in Vanuatu, which consists of diverse histories, cultures, and traditional values.

However, in 2015, everything began to change. I had my right leg amputated because of diabetes. My life would no longer be as I always pictured it. I felt hopeless at times. After the surgery, I was unable to go back to the shop, so my wife and I decided that it was best for me to stay back home and let her look after the business. As for her, I knew it would not be easy doing a husband and wife’s jobs at the same time, but my wife would never complain. Despite the challenges, my wife continued playing my role faithfully, at the shop.

There were times when she even faced difficulties when dealing with some of my customers because they thought it was not a woman's job. During the COVID-19 breakout, which led to a lockdown in 2020, it was very hard to earn the amount that we normally reached in one day, because we depend on tourism. Most of the time, not a single money was earned. Even though we had no customers, I always forced her to open up the shop. Which she did without any single complaint.

Then, one night while we were sleeping she woke me up and asked for a glass of water. I told her to go and fetch it herself because it would take me more time, but after that I realized that she was choking on her breath. I rushed out of the bed and called the paramedic. By the time the paramedic arrived, we had already lost her.

With her passing away, I find it very hard to go another day without her, because I depended on her every day and she supported me in everything. She was more like a mother than a wife to me. She treated me like her child. Ever since I went through the darkest days of life, she was always by my side supporting and helping me in every way she could. I mourned for two months. My adopted son was with me throughout my mourning for my late wife. Then, I decided to move on with life and accept the fact that she was gone. It was important to make changes and decisions on how I did things and how I lived. I decided to rely on island food from

my garden, which helped a lot. I had to take the risk to do things on my own, despite the fact that I have diabetes.

As weeks passed by, I decided to go back to my shop. At first it was hard, but as days went by I got used to it slowly. Even though I knew that there would be no customers, I just showed up to my shop every day as it had become my habit. Most of the time the women at the Centre Point would give me a little money to support me for my daily bus fares; and not only that, sometimes they would give me food and other essential goods that can help sustain myself.

The government told us about a set of grants made available for people with disabilities to support us. That we could use it to pay our electricity and water bills. However, that was already last year. We haven't heard from them since their last visit. I think the government should include people like me in their upcoming developments, so that we can also earn money because it is very difficult to earn money during this pandemic crisis. I also think that the government should not be limited to modern social media, but to work through customary and traditional links as valuable media, too.

Despite the challenges and crisis happening now, I thank the Lord for my life. Though my business isn't making any money, and despite losing my wife, I am grateful that God protects and keeps me alive. My best advice to everyone out there is that everything is possible if you believe in God.



# I Want the Government to Recognise People like Me

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My name is Deborah, I am from the Tongoa island. I have two kids, and I recently got separated from my partner. The outbreak of the virus has caused a lot of impact on my social, economic, and cultural way of living. In 2016, I started working at a supplies company, where I did different jobs, including assisting customers and operating the cashier. My life was going well, I enjoyed my work very much. But, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, Vanuatu had to close its border, which means no inbound or outbound flights. And with these closures, no more tourists.

And when there are no more tourists, the hotels, our main customers that shopped with us, no longer operated. They also closed their doors because they were not making any money, which meant no income for my employer.

In March 2021, our manager called for a meeting and during our meeting he said, “Some of you will be put out of work because of the situation we are in.” He did not mention the staff names that were going to be put off work, so I thought it was not going to be me. The next day when I came to work I was given a letter; when I opened it and read it, I found out that I was amongst the employees that were going to be put out of work.

I felt so sad after reading the letter. I was filled with tears. “How am I going to support my kids? How will I provide for my family?” All sorts of questions kept battling through my brain. I felt hopeless, full of worrying and suddenly anxiety got control of me. The following weeks my partner and I got separated because of his cheating and his violent acts towards me.

So my kids and I moved in with my parents, because I do not want my kids to grow up in such violent environment. My decision was to protect them and myself. I had to do what is best for my kids and myself. I did seek support from the Vanuatu Women Centre and Family Protection Unit at the police station and submitted a written statement to them.

The Vanuatu Women Centre and Family Protection Unit helped me a lot by encouraging and giving me advice, while the police officers called for round-table meeting at the police station, but my partner did not show up. I didn't care anyways, I am done with him!

Because I was no longer employed, I had to look for ways to earn income so that I can support my family. I started cooking food and selling it in *nakamals* [Kava bars] and road markets. Sometimes I earn a lot of income but sometimes I earn just enough, which is still good; so long I put food on the table, this is what matters the most.

I kept selling food at the road market for four months, before my aunt came and took me in to work at the Vanuatu Young Women for Change organisation on a contract for six months. I was very happy as I know I will have money again that can sustain my family and myself.

With the ongoing pandemic, the Ministry of Health has put up rules and regulations, such as: people must maintain social distancing, practice hand washing, and also encouraging people to go get vaccinated. The government also gave out a stimulus package to most of the companies' bosses and they would hand them out for the workers. I only received the stimulus package once. Although I was grateful, this was not sufficient to survive. Since the pandemic, the way I do things has changed.

Before the pandemic I was free to move around from place to place; the way we eat has changed also, I have to save money to buy our essentials only and nothing else. Sometimes my kids would ask for money to buy snacks and I can only regretfully say no because I have to manage in order to put food on the table.

Attending birthday parties, wedding ceremonies, and funeral is not like before. Some of my friends became my strangers. Sometimes it feels like we are living in different countries because I hardly see them anymore. I do not get to see most of my family members as well; social media is what keeps us in touch.

I want the government to recognise people like me in such a pandemic that we are in. The government should give out funds so that it can help individuals start their own business to keep them occupied and to sustain them and their families. Also, the government should create more development in order to make more available spaces for people and job employment opportunities within the country.

Overall, this pandemic caused a lot of impact to me and my family, in terms of losing my job, changing the way of living, and keeping me isolated from my other families and friends. But with all of the negative impact happening to me, I still thank the Lord for my protecting family and my life.



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## It Takes a Village

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I am Dorah, 52 years old, from East Efate, with two children—a daughter and son. I work as a community mobiliser for a program called Women I Toktok Tugeta, coordinated by Action Aid Vanuatu. My role as a mobiliser is to coordinate activities on the ground and to mobilize my fellow village women to be empowered through workshops, awareness, and other events in our community.

I love my job I have been working in for over three years. I get the opportunity to travel around the islands in Vanuatu,

working with other sisters in other islands. This program has helped me mobilize our women's groups, which is making a lot of positive impact in our women's lives.

However, this pandemic has changed a lot of our lives economically and has limited us from accessing social and economic services we need. Our former hotel workers have turned to domestic farming to earn small cash to send their children to school and to buy basic household needs.

Additionally, natural disasters and climate change have also negatively impacted our environment, which endangers our lives as rural people. One of the biggest issues in my community is access to health. Though we have an Aid Post,\* it doesn't open every day and it is not staffed appropriately. Most times, when we are sick we have to search for our aid post worker all over the village.

The Women I Toktok Tugeta team spreads awareness about how people can protect themselves from the virus, which helps communities to practice social distancing, hand washing, etc. We are also encouraging everyone in my village to go and get vaccinated. But we want a health center and a fully trained registered nurse that can look after us. It costs us 2,000 Vatu (USD 20) to get proper medical care at Vila Central Hospital. Accessing good health that is free or at low cost is our most important need.

My work takes me to other islands but relations with colleagues are not always smooth during this time; rumors can cause harm because you can lose people's trust and respect. I encountered a lot of discrimination, but then I learned to stand strong, remind myself that I am strong and beautiful and that what I am doing is what I can give back to my beautiful community. This is what I love doing.

I know my daughter will take after me when she grows up. I always encourage my family and community to prepare for the worst, as I would tell them prevention is better than a cure. We must not wait for donors to respond to whatever situation we go through; we should make sure our gardens are full of food, and we encourage each other to plant as much food as possible.

We have our community resilience market. We harvest from our gardens and we sell to make small money to buy sugar or rice for our children. There is six of us who are practicing this initiative, which we find quite helpful. In doing so, we are building relationships as well as putting different varieties of food on our family tables. Sometimes we face challenges, such as our garden produce doesn't sell and we bring it back home. Many of the villagers lost their jobs, so even when we make 400 Vatu (USD 4) we still appreciate it. We then divide the 400 Vatu into eight parts: for emergency use; death in the community; health; school fees; transportation; food; weddings; and others. I know 400 Vatu is a small amount,

but for me and my community it is so big because that's what we get from selling our crops.

My market vendor team developed a plan few months ago where we traded our root crops and vegetables for bananas. For example, I can trade a basket of cucumber with my sister who has a big garden of bananas, so I give her a bag of cucumbers and she gives me two bunches of bananas.

God is blessing me and the work I do. In return, I encourage people in my community to pray more and stop gossiping. I talk to God every day like I talk to my husband about my plans, pains, and achievement. This what motivates me to carry out the plans and the dreams I have for my family and community.

*\* Vanuatuans refer to health clinics as Aid Posts.*



## Finding Pride in Self-Reliance

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I am Chief Timothy Andrew Marikoftau. I am unemployed, but I get too busy looking after our communities as a watch tower. I want to make sure that my community is always healthy, clean, and is always protected. I work with my people to make sure that we promote self-reliance. I make sure no foreigners bribe my people for money! They may have money, but if they are coming to take away our self-reliance, we must not accept these kinds of people. We live and eat the same foods, we are simple people and that is our culture, which is very unique, and we have strong family ties. Our values cannot be purchased.





We, Vanuatu people, are one family, despite our challenges, we remain one family and that is very precious. Most of our community people use traditional medicines because we do not have money to obtain proper medical care. When the dengue fever epidemic hit us, I advised the people to drink papaw leaves and they did. Family education is very important.

Our people work hard. They create small income-generating businesses to make cash during this pandemic, including sewing and home bakeries. They raise money from the sales of their garments and use the money to feed their extended families, including those unemployed. Many people go to casinos to make money, but many of our men and women generate their own cash in their households. People gossip of course and many youngsters steal. We handle them well! Those who steal are those that are lazy. Of course, there are people who misbehave but these are very young people, the juveniles...

In my community people work hard, they help each other... gossip is part of life, but challenges make us strong. Our culture is that when you bring me food, I give you blessings in return. To ensure food security, I buy vegetable seeds and get my family to plant around our house. I encourage back yard and front yard gardening and other families are doing the same. We are also cutting down on imported food and now preserving organic foods. By doing this, we can ensure our good health and well-being. People are scared of this virus; this pandemic will allow thieves and robbers to come in with their coins and money, but we have what the people needs and that is organic.

We have to believe in ourselves. Why are we still rank the happiest place on earth? It is because we are unique, we are resilient, we have our own traditional ways of survival that keeps us going through this pandemic. We are lucky people. Strengthening our immune system is the best! I want to ask the government if they have collected people's opinions about this pandemic. Is the government listening to the people's concerns or are they just there to be included in the payrolls? There is a global change and is the government making those researches and find best practices that we could adopt as a country to protect our people?

They must listen to our wise men in the villages. They have to stop chasing after money and start listening to our people's concerns and opinions. Chiefs are paramount; they must be included in these national decisions for the safety and protection of our people. The government must work with the grassroots in order to make proper decisions. The government is for the people, elected by the people, and therefore it is vital for the government to seek traditional leaders' opinions. The government must prevent instability.

Finally, my advice to everyone is: gather yourself and use your abilities to create your own jobs to make money. I believe we already have the human and natural resources we need, we have the IT skills, so let us all come back together to our *nakamals* and make those inclusive decisions that are just to improve the protection and dignity of our people, communities, and nation.





# **We Have Equal Rights to Live a Happy Life**

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My name is Micky and I am 28 years old. I am very engaged in social projects, such as raising awareness on sexual reproductive health in rural areas, contributing to organizing weddings, fundraisings, funerals—as families are always here for each other in good times and bad times. I am friendly to all, to my family, friends, and even those I do not know. I am usually a happy person but do get very upset when people are homophobic or discriminatory. I know my rights to make my own choices and to live a happy life. I am born the way I am. I cannot change it. My culture doesn't accept it, though.

Sometimes I am being discriminated by my community, family, and relatives. When I want to live my life and make some choices for my happiness, my community reacts negatively and discriminates me. I deserve happiness like others do and I always try to do my best to have peace within myself and to be happy at all times. People move freely with partners—I can understand and share their happiness. What I do is hide my feelings and my true self in a shell where I feel comfortable and try my best to fill in what the community expects a life to be.

People in our communities should accept the fact that we have equal rights to live a happy life. Communities should accept this, stop gossiping and discriminating, and put more emphasis in supporting human rights education to spread throughout this nation. More awareness programs should enable those people to access information and a clearer vision and opportunity to utilize basic human rights or training programs that can assist them in life. This way people live in harmony with each other. My message to other young people is this: it is our human rights to have access to such services to sustain our lives, our families, and communities. We need to always be more positive and proactive to create a better living environment for people with special needs, widows, single parents, orphans, and children with special needs that we see living around our communities, as well as elderly people and LGBTQI+. It's our call!

Personally, I have not experienced any domestic violence issues, but sometimes when I am sad I always share my pain with my younger sister. She provides support, encouragement, and is always with me when am down or in my dark times. My sister is a very understanding person. We support each other in so many ways. I pray every day and I trust that praying is one of the main keys to happiness in life. To me praying gives and provides me peace.

I do get downhearted and sad to see families and relatives fight and dispute over lack of food at home. I cannot understand how people will survive with the current COVID-19 pandemic. A lot of people lost their jobs, especially people who work in the tourism industry, such as in hotels, resorts, cruise boats, handicraft markets trading, and tour guides. I have visited homes and I know a lot of homes only eat two or one meal daily throughout this pandemic period. This is due to a lack of cash flow in the country, which increases hardship and unemployment.

Despite the pandemic, discrimination, and lack of jobs, I am happy to have my family networks that can provide for me. I am grateful to have a happy family with open hearts and doors in good and bad times. We care for ourselves, as well as our relatives, friends, and neighbors from other islands. We ensure there is food on the table. We maintain our cultural values and support those in need.

In addition to the pandemic crisis, my parents are separated. My mother moved to another town. At first, I sold kava to support my family but did not make a lot of income. The money made was enough to cover food and other essential needs only. Unemployment within the family also contributes to hardships for survival in town. But my faith in God provides me peace to never give up and to find ways to address immediate needs to assist my father, sister, and my two nieces.

My message to the government is to invest more money in creating job opportunities in Vanuatu and targeting youth unemployment in all sectors. This way youths like myself can obtain employment to support myself, my family, as well as my community. Lack of vision in targeting youth unemployment will only create a venue for increasing social crimes within our communities.

The government must prevent and protect the image of this country that has been rated as the best place on earth three times in a row just because of our smiling faces. This way it helps to end discrimination, violence, and abusing human rights in our societies.

# Photo Credits

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Front cover: *The pandemic leaves Samoa's fishing industry shipwrecked.* Photo credit: Faaniniva Niumata.

Page 6. *For frontline workers, time with loved ones is as limited as precious—Joseph and his family, Fiji.* Photo credit Dialogue Fiji

Page 10. *Like many single mothers, Susana is determined to make a better life for her and her children despite the pandemic, Fiji.* Photo credit Dialogue Fiji.

Page 14. *Lessons of resilience are drawn from the most affected by it.*

Left: *Naibili Tagicakibau, National Paralympic champion, Fiji.* Photo credit: Dialogue Fiji

Top right: *Amelia delivering lesson notes to her students in rural Fiji.* Photo credit: Dialogue Fiji

Bottom right: *Hardy Leo in his shop, Vanuatu.* Photo credit: Vanuatu Young Women for Change (VWYC)

Page 21. *Members of the Kge Brotherhood at work, Fiji.* Photo credit: Fiji Dialogue

Page 24. *Despite pandemic-induced hardship, S.P. feels blessed to live in Ngeremlengui, Palau.* Photo credit: Elilai Ngirmang

Page 26. *Ngeremlengui has a population of 350 inhabitants and is one of Palau's six states.* Photo credit: Elilai Ngirmang

Top left: *Fruit trees*

Bottom left: *Ngeremlengui Rambotang, a plant in the soapberry family*

Right: *The Ngeremlengui Dock*

Page 33. *Klem's flower garden awaiting her return home to Aimeliik, Palau.* Photo credit: Elilai Ngirmang

Page 35. *Cleo is hoping to up roots and start fresh far away from Palau.* Photo credit: Elilai Ngirmang

Page 36. *Long Island, Koror, Palau.* Photo credit: Elilai Ngirmang

Page 38. *Tellei's hair styling at a traditional omengat ceremony, Palau.* Photo credit: Elilai Ngirmang

Page 40. *Embracing tradition, Palau.* Photo credit: Elilai Ngirmang

Left: *Mur traditional chief feast, Palau.*

Top right: *Toluk—traditional Palauan money.*

Bottom right: *Omengat—a celebration of motherhood.*

Page 43. *In Samoa, market vendors and domestic violence victims felt like the time had stopped when the pandemic was declared.* Photo credit: Faaniniva Niumata

Top left: *The Fugalei Market, Apia.*

Bottom left: *Samoa Victim Support Group, one of the leading civil organisations in the country providing assistance to COVID-19 affected individuals*

Right: *The Apia Clock Tower*

Page 49. *Street vendor, Apia, Samoa.* Photo credit: Faaniniva Niumata

Page 56. *Parked busses, Samoa.* Photo credit: Faaniniva Niumata

Page 64. *Chief Timothy, Vanuatu.* Photo credit VWYC

Page 66. *As access to staple imported food decreases, Pacific Islanders turn to growing their own crops and rediscover local food.*

Left: *Cheluit—coconut crab soup, Palau.* Photo credit Elilai Ngirmang

Top right: *Mango trees, Palau.* Photo credit Elilai Ngirmang

Bottom right: *Farmer picking bananas, Samoa.* Photo credit: Faaniniva Niumata

Back cover: *Pacific Islanders' resilience stems from a strong connection with the ocean. Boat ride to Kayangel, Palau.* Photo credit: Elilai Ngirmang

# Acknowledgements

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**Ms. Farisha Nigar, Dialogue Fiji.** Dialogue Fiji's mission is to engage with others to create inclusive spaces for dialogue and peace building, and develop capacities in Fiji's society for a culture of dialogue. Dialogue Fiji is committed to upholding democracy, human rights and justice in the Fijian society, and works to empower citizens to actively participate and engage on issues impacting their lives.

**Ms. Elilai Ngirmang, Living All Inclusive in Belau (LAIIB), Palau.** LAIIB is committed to inclusive excellence and prosperity by engaging the Palau community in education, advocacy, and outreach, through strategic planning and partnerships with private and public entities, for the acceptance and support of all individuals of all diverse genders and identities.

**Ms. Faaniniva Niumata, Niumata Esquires, Samoa.** Niumata Esquires is a development consultancy established in 2019. Its main areas of focus include: Gender Equality, Community and Rural Development, and Sustainable Economic Empowerment. It has a large national network and diverse team of experts. They work in partnership with the Samoa Victim Support Group and Samoa Faafafine Association for the advancement of human rights and protection of vulnerable members of the Samoan community.

**Ms. Anne Pakoa, Vanuatu Young Women for Change (VYWC).** Adlyn Rambay, Jocelyne Mete, Sabrina Rose Rasu, Alick James Pakoa, and Yvanna Ayong Kimberly also contributed to this project. VYWC is a girls-led not-for-profit organization, established in 2013 with the mission to promote equality, rights and access to bring about positive changes for young women and girls in Vanuatu. The organization was established in 2013 purposely to provide a space for young women and girls to participate in national policy processes and also to ensure that issues affecting members of their constituency is resolved accordingly with their participation.

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National Democratic Institute (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that responds to the aspirations of people around the world to live in democratic societies that recognize and promote basic human rights. Since its founding in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to support and strengthen democratic institutions and practices by strengthening political parties, civic organizations and parliaments, safeguarding elections, and promoting citizen participation, openness, and accountability in government.

With staff members and volunteer political practitioners from more than 100 nations, NDI brings together individuals and groups to share ideas, knowledge, experiences and expertise. Partners receive broad exposure to best practices in international democratic development that can be adapted to the needs of their own countries. NDI's multinational approach reinforces the message that while there is no single democratic model, certain core principles are shared by all democracies.

NDI began working with civil society and women activists in the Pacific Islands in 2015. NDI's programming goal in the Pacific Islands

is to support inclusive and citizen-centered governance by advancing domestic election monitoring efforts, strengthening civil society, enhancing government transparency and accountability, and raising awareness on barriers to women's political participation.

For more information about this project, please contact us at [ahansen@ndi.org](mailto:ahansen@ndi.org).

