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PRESS STATEMENT

Protecting the Rights and Dignity of Older Persons

The Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission (Commission) is concerned about the growing human rights issues affecting older persons in Fiji.

As Fiji's population ages, greater attention must be given to protecting the rights, wellbeing and dignity of older persons. The Commission has seen, through complaints it received and reports in the media, an increase in concerns involving neglect, financial exploitation, emotional and physical abuse, housing insecurity, and difficulties accessing services and support.

Across Fiji's communities, respect for elders has traditionally been a source of pride and strength. Our parents, grandparents and elders are valued for their wisdom, experience and lifelong contributions. Many have spent decades caring for their families, serving their communities and helping shape Fiji. It is therefore deeply saddening to see increasing reports and complaints involving older persons. These issues strike at values that many Fijians hold dear: respect, compassion, family responsibility and care for those who continue to care for us.

The Commission has received disturbing complaints of older persons being abandoned by their family members, including an 87-year-old woman left at the Commission's reception without clothes or food. The Commission also received a complaint alleging that a religious organisation providing housing assistance locked out family members that included elderly and persons with disabilities. In another case, an elderly man was forced out of his own home and left to live in a tent within his own compound without access to proper sanitation and safe drinking water. There are so many other cases that has been surfacing through complaints received by the Commission and also through social media and news articles.

The Commission emphasises that these are not simply family or social concerns. They are human rights issues. Older persons have the same rights as everyone else, including the right to live with dignity and security, access essential services, participate in community life, make decisions about their own lives, and be free from neglect, abuse, discrimination and exploitation.

Section 26 (3)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji 2013 guarantees the right to equality and freedom from unfair discrimination, including on the ground of age. Older persons are entitled to equal protection and benefit of the law and should not be disadvantaged simply because of their age. Fiji's international human rights obligations reinforce these responsibilities. As a party to the International Covenant on Economic,

Social and Cultural Rights, Fiji has obligations concerning the rights to social security, including social insurance under Article 9; an adequate standard of living, including food, clothing and housing under Article 11; and the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health under Article 12.

Older persons may be particularly vulnerable because of ill health, reduced mobility, social isolation or dependence on others for care and support. These circumstances make it even more important that families, communities, institutions and public authorities take active steps to safeguard their rights and wellbeing.

Protecting older persons also means safeguarding their superannuation. Retirement savings represent years of work and contributions. They must be managed responsibly and in members' interests, with safeguards to protect financial security in retirement. Any pension or superannuation reform must carefully consider its impact on older persons' ability to meet everyday costs, including food, housing, medication and care. Long-term financial sustainability must be pursued alongside the protection of retirees' dignity and wellbeing. Reforms should involve meaningful consultation, accessible information, and fair opportunities to raise concerns and seek review.

The Commission also calls for public and private service providers to ensure that older persons can access healthcare, transport, identification and other essential services in a manner that is equitable, respectful and responsive to their needs.

The Commission welcomes the Government's work on the National Ageing Policy 2026-2035 and encourages continued efforts to strengthen protections and support services for older persons.

Protecting older persons is a shared responsibility. Families, communities, faith-based organisations, civil society groups, businesses and government agencies all have a role to play in ensuring that older persons can live safely, independently and with dignity. The way we treat our elders reflects the values of our society. By protecting their rights and wellbeing, we honour their contributions and preserve the values that have long guided our communities.

Growing old should never mean losing one's dignity, safety or sense of belonging. Every older person deserves to live free from fear, neglect and abuse.

Ms. Veena Singh
Commissioner
Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission

Statement attributed to Commissioner Veena Singh, Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission.