

Good morning.

My name is Moe Turaga.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of this land – the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation and pay my respect to elders past, present and emerging.

I also recognise and remember the 62,000 people who were blackbirded here from the Pacific nations as indentured and forced laborers and the significant contribution they have made to Australia's economic, cultural and social development.

I am both a survivor of modern slavery in Australia and an advocate for change.

I'm here today to tell you my story. – the short version!

Of course I had no idea what forced labour or human trafficking was when I was trafficked to Australia at the age of 17.

My father died when I was a teenager in Fiji.

A cousin approached me to go to Australia, where he said I could study and earn money that he would send back to my mother.

Like most boys I wanted to do the right thing by my Mum.

When I arrived, my cousin took my passport and gave it to a migration agent, and told me I had a debt to pay off for my travel and visa costs.

Soon I was on a grape farm in Victoria, living in a pickers hut with a bunch of other Fiji boys.

We worked from dawn to dusk, seven days a week.

We would all jump on a truck at 6am and picked or pruned grapes that went to the big markets in Melbourne and Sydney.

When there were no grapes, I picked watermelons and lettuce at other farms, some of which went to fast food restaurants.

It was hard work, and we had little contact with anyone else. The cold months were really hard for boys used to the tropics.

I never knew how much money my cousin was getting for my labour. There was never any contract or accounting for my work. I just got on the truck every day and did what I was told.

My cousin assured me he was sending money to my mother.

We didn't have any access to phones, but we were innovative...

We discovered a trick to making free international phone calls from pay phones.

It was two years before I was finally able to talk to my Mum.

I called Mum's number from a pay phone one day and she answered.

Then she let me know in no uncertain terms that my cousin hadn't sent her any money at all.

Angry, cheated, deceived, ashamed, powerless, trapped – all of these emotions and worse...

That's what it feels like to find out you're someone else's slave.

That was a bad day.

There was eventually a happy ending to my story.

As it turns out I was saved by going to Church!

Every so often I was allowed to go to Church on a Sunday.

I met a farmer at the local church. When she heard my story, she invited me to come and work on her farm instead.

Her name is Audrey. So I ran away to work on Audrey's farm. She helped me to get my passport back and to build a new life in freedom.

I never found out how much money my cousin got from my labour.

There was never any contract or record of my work. But I am marked by slavery forever having been scarred by injuries received when I fell off the truck one day into barbed wire.

The point I really want to get across is that there are people working in our domestic fresh food supply chain now who are in the same position I was back then. We see this information in the news every day.

Beyond our borders there are many more millions working in slavery-like conditions.

Which is why, for me, Australia's Modern Slavery Act is the most important social reform in a generation.

We all now have a tool to hold large businesses accountable to their public declarations under the Modern Slavery Act.

In the last two years, I have shared my story with journalists, government representatives, heads of churches and global business leaders.

I still hear so many stories today of Pacific Islanders being sold false promises for a better life.

Just the mention of working in Australia is enough for some of my fellow countrymen and women to leave everything behind, go into debt and believe the promises of "a good job with good pay".

Sometimes they get that. Too often the reality when they get here is very different.

Over-crowded living quarters, sometimes nothing more than a shipping container, rusty caravan, tents or garages.

Middle men operating as labour hire contractors gouge back most of the earnings through unfair deductions for housing, transport, bond and fees.

For the growing number of Pacific Island women and female backpackers working on farms sexual abuse is a real threat and sadly some women have become victims of terrible crimes. There are others who never tell anyone.

Is this slavery?

In some case it fits the legal definition.

You might wonder why there aren't more recent survivors who can tell their stories?

For some it isn't safe. Many have moved on, or been moved on.

Our immigration officials seem to deport people without asking the kind of questions that might identify victims of human trafficking or forced labour.

For many survivors, there's a sense of shame or personal failure and we just want to get on with our lives.

In the Pacific Islander culture we tend not to complain or talk about ourselves, and we rarely argue with or criticise people in positions of authority. You must understand how powerful our culture can be in keeping us silent and suffering.

Modern slavery is part of a system in which poverty, inequality, oppression, and fear all play their part.

So hearing my story and knowing what you know now, I ask for your urgent attention towards ending slavery in our generation.

Seeing everyone here today is a sign of hope. People in situations of modern slavery who are hidden in our supply chains need hope. But, most importantly, they need your action.

Thank you