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FEATURE ARTICLE

The Student Rental Accommodation Struggle

Rental accommodation plays a crucial role in Fiji's economy, particularly in the urban housing sector. Many factors contribute to the growing demand for rental properties, including the migration of individuals from rural areas to cities in search of better educational opportunities, employment, and an improved standard of living. In addition to internal migration, Fiji also attracts a considerable number of students and workers from neighbouring Pacific Island countries who enrol in tertiary and higher education institutions across the nation. This steady influx of students and young professionals has led to an increased need for affordable, accessible, and quality rental housing. Consequently, the rental market in urban centres has become a key driver of economic activity, influencing property values and rental prices.

As the demand for rental accommodation in cities like Suva, Nadi, and Lautoka continues to grow, rental prices have been on the rise. The rapid urbanization and the increasing number of students and workers searching for housing have created a highly competitive rental market. While this benefits property owners and investors by driving up rental yields, it poses significant financial challenges for tenants, particularly students and those from lower-income households. Many students struggle to find affordable accommodation that meets their basic needs, leading to concerns about overcrowding, poor living conditions, and financial stress. In this article, we will explore some of the major challenges students face in securing rental accommodation and provide practical advice to help them navigate the rental market more effectively.

Rent Freeze in Fiji

The Rent Freeze Policy in Fiji was introduced as a measure to protect tenants from sudden rental increases and ensure housing remains affordable, particularly for students and low-income earners. Recognizing the financial challenges many tenants face, the policy prevents landlords from raising rental prices, offering stability in a competitive housing market.

To promote transparency and accountability, landlords are required to retain copies of tenancy agreements and rental receipts for up to seven years. Failing to provide these records when requested may result in legal consequences. Tenants are encouraged to document any rental issues they encounter, such as disputes over rent increases, eviction threats, or unfulfilled

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maintenance requests. Keeping records of messages, letters, or notices can serve as evidence in case of disagreements with landlords.

Tenants who experience issues related to their rental agreements should seek guidance and support to ensure their rights are upheld. By staying informed and maintaining proper documentation, both landlords and tenants can contribute to a fair and stable rental market.

Students Forced to Accept Unfair Rental Offers

For many students, finding suitable rental accommodation can be a daunting challenge, particularly when landlords take advantage of their limited options. In some cases, landlords may exert undue pressure on students, creating an unfair power dynamic in rental negotiations. This often happens when students are given very few choices or are presented with rental agreements that include rigid terms, leaving little room for negotiation.

A common scenario involves rental properties located close to universities and tertiary institutions, where demand is high. Some landlords may set non-negotiable prices, knowing that students—especially those unfamiliar with the area or coming from overseas—have limited time to secure housing before the academic term begins. As a result, many students feel compelled to accept rental agreements they are uncomfortable with, simply because they have no other viable alternatives.

This situation can lead to financial strain, where students end up paying inflated rents beyond their means. In some cases, they may also face exploitative rental conditions, such as overcrowding, inadequate living standards, or restrictive lease terms that do not protect their rights as tenants. The urgency to secure a place to live often leaves students vulnerable, making them more likely to accept unfair terms rather than risk being left without accommodation.

It is crucial for both landlords and tenants to understand their rights and responsibilities to foster a fair rental environment. Students should be encouraged to thoroughly review rental agreements, seek advice before signing leases, and advocate for reasonable terms. Transparency and ethical practices in the rental market are essential to ensuring that students are not coerced into agreements that may later cause financial or legal difficulties.

Racism in the Rental Housing Market

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Racial discrimination continues to be a significant concern in the rental market, where individuals may be treated unfairly based on their race, ethnicity, or nationality. In Fiji, some tenants face bias and exclusion from landlords or property managers, making it more difficult for them to secure accommodation. This form of discrimination not only affects tenants financially but also contributes to social inequality by limiting access to safe and affordable housing.

A recent incident in Suva highlighted this issue when a tenant paid \$1,400 to a real estate agent to secure a rental property. However, upon discovering the tenant's racial background, the landlord refused to proceed with the rental agreement, effectively denying them housing based on prejudice. Cases like this reveal the underlying racial bias that still exists within parts of the rental market, creating barriers for students, migrants, and other vulnerable individuals.

Discrimination can take many forms, including higher rental charges for certain groups, outright refusal to rent, or unequal treatment in the application process. International students and migrants are particularly at risk, as they may lack the legal knowledge or support systems needed to challenge these unfair practices. This forces many to accept poor living conditions or pay excessively high rents just to secure a place to stay.

It is important to recognize that racial discrimination in housing is illegal. The Constitution of Fiji guarantees equity and fairness for all, and discriminatory practices in rental agreements violate these fundamental principles. Denying individuals access to housing based on their race, ethnicity, or religion is not only unethical but also unjust, as housing is a basic human need that should be available to everyone, regardless of their background.

To combat this issue, tenants should be aware of their rights and report discriminatory practices when encountered. Raising awareness and holding landlords accountable for fair and ethical rental practices is essential to ensuring that Fiji's housing market remains inclusive and equitable for all.

The Growing Problem of Rental Scams

Rental scams have become an increasing concern in Fiji, with fraudulent landlords or agents taking advantage of tenants, particularly students and first-time renters. These scams typically involve fake property listings advertised at attractive rental rates to lure potential tenants. Scammers often pressure individuals into making upfront payments—such as deposits or

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rent—before they have had the chance to inspect the property or verify the legitimacy of the landlord or agent. Once payment is made, the scammer disappears, leaving the victim without both their money and a place to stay.

One of the most common tactics used in rental scams is online deception, where fraudsters post misleading advertisements on social media or property rental websites, showcasing non-existent or unavailable properties. Some scammers even claim to be “overseas landlords” and use fake identities to avoid direct interaction. Others pose as legitimate real estate agents and provide forged lease agreements to make the deal appear genuine.

To avoid falling victim to these scams, tenants should take precautionary steps before committing to any rental arrangement:

- Always inspect the property in person before making any payments. If an agent or landlord refuses to allow a viewing, it could be a red flag.
- Verify the legitimacy of the landlord or agent by requesting identification and checking their credentials.
- Insist on a formal, signed lease agreement before transferring any money. A legitimate rental transaction should include a written contract that outlines the terms and conditions.
- Be cautious of deals that seem "too good to be true." Unrealistically low rental prices can often indicate a scam.
- Keep records of all communication and transactions to ensure there is evidence in case of any disputes.

If a suspicious rental offer is encountered, tenants should report it immediately to the relevant authorities to prevent others from falling victim to the same fraudulent scheme.

The Importance of Dealing with Licensed Real Estate Agents

When searching for rental accommodation, particularly in competitive markets, tenants should always prioritize dealing with licensed real estate agents. Licensed agents operate under regulated standards, ensuring transparency, fairness, and legal compliance in rental

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transactions. In contrast, dealing with unverified individuals or informal brokers can expose tenants to unfair agreements and potential financial loss.

One of the key benefits of working with a licensed real estate agent is the assurance of credibility and professionalism. These agents are legally bound to follow ethical business practices, including providing accurate property listings, fair rental pricing, and proper lease agreements. Unlike private landlords or informal middlemen, licensed agents are accountable for their actions and can be held responsible for any misleading or fraudulent practices.

Licensed real estate agents operate under the Real Estate Agents Licensing Board (REALB), which ensures that they comply with industry regulations and uphold professional standards. This means that if tenants face unethical behaviour, misleading information, or disputes, they can report the issue to the licensing board, which has the authority to investigate complaints and take disciplinary action against agents who violate the law.

Working with a licensed real estate agent helps tenants avoid rental scams, as licensed agents are required to verify property ownership before listing rentals, reducing the risk of fraudulent advertisements. Additionally, legitimate agents ensure that tenants receive proper lease agreements that clearly outline their rights and responsibilities under the law. Licensed agents also follow market standards, making them less likely to engage in overpricing, hidden fees, or exploitative practices. Furthermore, they provide better dispute resolution in case of conflicts with the rental property.

To ensure they are dealing with a licensed agent, tenants should check with the Real Estate Agents Licensing Board (REALB) to verify whether an agent is officially registered. It is also advisable to request official credentials, confirm that the agent is affiliated with a legitimate real estate company, and avoid making upfront cash payments without proper documentation. Additionally, researching online reviews or seeking recommendations from other tenants can help gauge the reliability of an agent.

By ensuring that they only deal with licensed real estate agents, tenants—especially students—can protect themselves from rental fraud, unfair treatment, and financial exploitation.

Conclusion

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Securing rental accommodation remains a challenge for students due to rising costs, limited availability, unfair rental terms, and scams. While measures like the Rent Freeze offer some stability, tenants must stay informed of their rights and responsibilities to avoid exploitation.

Dealing with licensed real estate agents provides added security, as they operate under regulated standards and are accountable for their actions. Tenants should always verify landlords and agents, inspect properties before payment, and document all agreements.

A fair rental market requires ethical landlord practices, tenant awareness, and stricter enforcement of regulations. By taking proactive steps, students can better navigate the rental market and secure safe, affordable housing.

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