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Feature Article

When Complaints Tell a Story: A Closer Look at Fiji's Top 5 Consumer Issues

As the year nears its end, the Consumer Council of Fiji has once again taken stock of the most common complaints received from consumers across the country. From spoiled food and disputed rents to malfunctioning electronics, each case reveals more than just frustration, it tells a story about how Fijians interact with the marketplace, what goes wrong, and how awareness can turn confusion into empowerment.

This week's feature article dives into the Council's top five complaint categories, Food and Drinks, Landlord/Tenancy, Public Transport, VAT and Receipts, and Electronic Goods (Home). By unpacking real cases handled by the Council, we explore what these issues mean for everyday consumers, their rights under the law, and the responsibilities they must uphold.

In essence, this feature is not just about problems, it's about learning from them so that every Fijian becomes a more informed, responsible, and confident consumer.

1. Food and Drinks

Food is a daily necessity, and when its quality falls below acceptable standards, the effects are immediate and personal. This year, several complaints were registered against traders and food outlets, ranging from spoiled products and expired goods to foreign objects found in meals.

Case Studies: Expired/Spoiled Food

One Suva resident recently lodged a complaint after purchasing a ready-made meal from a popular eatery. Upon opening it at home, she discovered mold on the rice and an unpleasant odour. When she attempted to return the meal, the trader refused to issue a refund, insisting that "all meals are sold as-is." Another similar case occurred when a consumer purchased a bag of flour from a supermarket, only to take it home and discover weevils inside the flour due to damaged packaging.

Your Rights: Under the Food Safety Regulations 2009, consumers have the right to safe and hygienic food. Any product that is expired, contaminated, or unfit for consumption is a breach of this right.

Your Responsibilities: Always check expiry dates, inspect packaging, and keep your receipts. In the event of a food safety issue, report it promptly to the Council or municipal health authorities, not just for personal redress, but to protect others.

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2. Landlord and Tenant

Housing is a fundamental need, yet the relationship between landlords and tenants often becomes tense due to bond disputes, eviction without notice, or failure to maintain rental properties. The Council handled complaints in this category, many involving tenants losing bond money unfairly or being evicted without the required notice period.

Case Study: Unreturned Bond

Take the case of a young family renting a two-bedroom flat in Nadi. After giving a month's notice and moving out due to rising costs, they requested the return of their \$800 bond. The landlord refused, claiming "cleaning costs."

Your Rights: Tenants have the right to rent accommodation that suits their needs and financial situation. They are also entitled to the return of their bond, provided the property is left in a reasonable condition, accounting for normal wear and tear. Landlords cannot withhold bond money unreasonably, and tenants are protected against excessive or unjustified deductions.

Your Responsibilities: Tenants must pay rent on time, care for the property, and provide written notice before vacating. A simple walk-through with the landlord before moving out can prevent later disputes.

3. Public Transport

Public transport is a vital part of daily life for thousands of Fijians, but passengers face a range of challenges. Complaints commonly include overcharging, poor driver behavior, and refusal to provide service. Overcrowding during peak hours, unreliable schedules and poorly maintained vehicles further exacerbate the problem. These issues highlight the urgent need for stronger regulation, improved accountability, and higher service standards across Fiji's public transport sector.

Case Studies: New Fares and Shoddy Cars

One commuter in Lautoka reported being overcharged by a minibus driver for a short route. When questioned, the driver replied, "That's the new fare." The Council verified with the Land Transport Authority (LTA) that no fare increase had been approved. The driver was fined and instructed to display fare tables clearly for passengers.

Another common issue arises with unhygienic or unsafe vehicles. In several cases, consumers complained about leaking roofs, torn seats, and reckless driving. The Council's collaborative

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inspections with LTA resulted in warnings and, in some instances, suspension of operating licenses.

Your Rights: Consumers have the right to fair and safe transport services. Fares must follow official rates, and drivers must conduct themselves professionally.

Your Responsibilities: Passengers should remain vigilant when paying fares and report unsafe behavior or overcharging. Public transport depends on accountability, and every passenger plays a role in maintaining safe and fair services

4. VAT, Stamp Duty, and Receipts

Taxes and levies may seem straightforward, but a surprising number of consumers fall victim to wrong VAT charges or traders' refusal to issue receipts. The Council has received complaints involving incorrect application of VAT, failure to provide receipts, or confusion over duty charges on purchases and services.

Case Study: The Price Behind the Price

A recent complaint came from a customer who purchased furniture from a local retailer. The trader charged VAT on an already VAT-inclusive price, inflating the cost. The consumer, noticing the discrepancy on the invoice.

Your Rights: Consumers are entitled to transparent pricing and receipts for all purchases. Traders must issue receipts that clearly show the VAT amount and total price. Any double charging or hidden fees is illegal.

Your Responsibilities: Always ask for an itemized receipt and review it carefully. If something doesn't add up, query it immediately. Remember, receipts are your proof in any dispute, never walk away without one.

5. Electronic Goods (Home)

In a digital age, electronics goods have become household essentials, from televisions and fridges to smartphones and washing machines. Yet, complaints have been registered for faulty or misrepresented electronic goods. The most common issues involve products failing shortly after purchase, refusal of repair or replacement, and unclear warranty terms.

Case Study: When Technology Turns Troublesome

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A consumer purchased a new washing machine that experienced a complete breakdown within two months of purchase. Upon returning it to the store, she was incorrectly informed by a salesperson that the warranty did not apply, and her request for a replacement was denied.

Later, it was revealed that the trader had deceptively sold a refurbished unit as new. The matter was resolved with the consumer receiving a genuine replacement washing machine and compensation for the significant inconvenience caused.

Your Rights: Consumers have the right to receive goods that are fit for purpose, free from defects, and as described. Faulty items within the warranty period must be repaired, replaced, or refunded.

Your Responsibilities: Before purchasing electronics, ask about the warranty, keep your receipts and warranty cards, and avoid unauthorized repairs that can void coverage. If issues arise, contact the trader in writing first, if unresolved, the Council can step in.

The Bigger Picture – Awareness Is Power

While these five categories represent the most common complaints, they also highlight a larger issue: many consumers are still unaware of their rights and the correct channels for redress. The Council plays a vital role in bridging that gap through education, advocacy, and complaint resolution.

Behind every statistic is a story of someone trying to do the right thing but not knowing where to turn. From food safety to faulty goods, the Council's interventions not only resolve individual complaints but also push for better practices among traders and service providers. Yet, consumer protection is not a one-sided effort. For every right, there is a corresponding responsibility. Consumers must read before signing, check before buying, and question before accepting. A vigilant consumer base keeps the marketplace fair, honest, and accountable.

A Call to Action

The message is simple: Be aware, be informed, and be proactive. Whether it's the meal on your plate, the roof over your head, or the bus you take to work, your choices as a consumer shape the market around you. If you experience unfair treatment, don't stay silent. Call us on 155 or email at complaints@consumersfiji.org.

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