ORIGINAL ARTICLE
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Only those who love us should decide our care: Elevating survivor voices of Takatāpui, Rainbow, and MVPFAFF+ communities

Paora Moyle (Ngāti Porou), Registered Social Worker

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: This article examines systemic harm inflicted on Takatāpui, Rainbow, and MVPFAFF+ communities in Aotearoa through state and faith-based institutions. Drawing on survivor testimony from the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, it situates these experiences within histories of cultural genocide, where colonial systems deliberately targeted those at the intersection of cultural identity and gender and sexual diversity.

METHODS: Using the Pū Rā Ka Ū framework, this qualitative study foregrounds verbatim accounts to honour survivors' voices.

FINDINGS: Findings reveal how institutional violence, medicalisation and conversion practices were mechanisms of assimilation, with ongoing intergenerational impacts. Survivors articulate both the trauma of identity erasure and visions for change grounded in mana motuhake and Indigenous-led solutions, calling for structural transformation over symbolic gestures. Social work emerges as a primary mechanism in state-imposed erasure, requiring critical examination of the profession's role in these systems.

IMPLICATIONS: As Ngāti Porou, takatāpui and nonbinary, a registered social worker, and a researcher, I position this work not to centre the social work profession but to create a platform for survivors' truths. This article serves those who have endured institutional harm by ensuring their visions for transformation remain unfiltered and central to future pathways toward justice.

Keywords: Takatāpui, nonbinary, MVPFAFF+, Pū Rā Ka Ū , state abuse, institutional harm

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL WORK *37(2)*, 60–73.

CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Paora Moyle (Ngāti Porou)
pmoyle2@yahoo.co.nz

Colonisation systematically erased Indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality through child removal, medicalisation, and conversion practices (Kerekere, 2017). In Aotearoa New Zealand and other settler colonial contexts, this deliberate severing of cultural ties reframed diverse gender and sexual identities as deviations rather than integral expressions of whakapapa. Pre-colonial Māori society embraced takatāpui identities as vital to whānau and hapori, but colonisation replaced this with heteronormative systems of control (Moyle, 2023).

As one survivor powerfully stated, "Resoundingly, taking someone's identity away is the biggest act of abuse."

Takatāpui, Rainbow and MVPFAFF+ people exist across all cultures, with identities shaped by intersectional and

evolving experiences. A survivor shared, "Being Rainbow, being MVPFAFF+, being LGBTQIA+ is different across all our generations ... There are multiple iterations of gender, there are multiple identities within gender."

This study emerged from engagements between takatāpui, Rainbow and MVPFAFF+ survivors and the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care in Aotearoa New Zealand. Following an inadequate online hui in October 2022, survivors requested a kanohi ki te kanohi wānanga with all Commissioners. The Commission agreed to support an independent report capturing themes from these engagements, resulting in the survivor-led report, *As a Kid I Always Knew Who I Was* (Moyle, 2023).

Despite documenting widespread institutional failings between 1950 and 1999, the Commission avoided naming what survivors identified as cultural genocide. As a survivor advisor on the *Whanaketia* report (Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, 2024), I witnessed this reluctance to acknowledge harms that meet international definitions of genocide, contrasting with our work on *Hāhā Uri, Hāhā Tea* (Savage et al., 2021), which directly named the genocidal nature of child removal. The government's response has been tokenistic, with the well-funded Crown Response Unit failing to deliver meaningful structural change (Pearse, 2024).

As Ngāti Porou, takatāpui and nonbinary, a registered social worker with 30 years of practice experience, and a researcher, I bring multiple perspectives to this work. However, this research is not intended to centre social work practice or theory, despite being published in a social work journal. Rather, it creates a platform where survivors of state-imposed erasure can speak directly to the systems, including the social work profession, which have functioned as mechanisms of colonial control. By prioritising lived experience and verbatim testimony, this approach challenges traditional academic frameworks that filter survivor knowledge through professional interpretation. As one survivor powerfully stated,

"I don't think anyone should have the power to make decisions about children who they don't love."

These words expose the dehumanisation of care reduced to policy. Real care must be grounded in empathy, dignity and whanaungatanga. The testimonies that form the foundation of this analysis represent both a record of systemic harm and a roadmap for structural transformation led by those most affected.

Methodology: Kaupapa Māori and Pū Rā Ka Ū framework

The research followed a qualitative inquiry approach grounded in Kaupapa Māori principles (Moyle, 2014; Pihama et al., 2002). Data collection included written notes and transcribed audio recordings from several wānanga and fono. Participation varied across engagements, with survivors themselves determining how and what they wished to contribute. All participants who shared their lived experiences gave informed consent for their pūrākau to be used, and the findings were peer-reviewed by survivors who participated in the engagements.

An independent analysis was undertaken using the Pū Rā Ka Ū analysis framework. Although this framework was not explicitly referenced in the original 2023 research report, it has been applied in this article as a culturally grounded analytical lens to organise participants' key kōrero. Initially developed by Wirihana (2012) and adapted with her consent, the framework offers a meaningful structure for engaging with complex survivor narratives. It has since been further developed by the research team at Te Whāriki Manawāhine o Hauraki[1] to prioritise verbatim quotes, upholding the integrity of survivors' insights and experiences. The framework has a range of applications

(Moyle, 2025), and in the context of this research, the themes that emerged were:

Pū relates to identity. It reflects how survivors understand who they are and who they were always meant to be before institutional harm. Pū centres the formation of self through whakapapa, cultural knowing, and the right to live as oneself without interference.

Rā represents hope. It speaks to the insight, strength and light found in acts of survival and cultural reconnection. Rā reflects moments where survivors reclaimed pride, language, and belonging in the face of sustained attempts to erase them.

Ka addresses harm. It brings forward the realities of institutional violence, medicalisation, and conversion practices, as well as the ongoing impacts of those experiences. Ka holds the weight of trauma while recognising how survivors interpret their past and present within wider systems of control.

Ū holds aspirations for the future. It reflects the calls for structural change grounded in mana motuhake and Indigenous-led responses. Ū expresses the will to transform systems and ensure the care of future generations through collective, sustained change.

This approach allows survivors' kōrero to be organised within a Māori knowledge framework that respects the cyclical nature of understanding, growth and transformation.

Literature: resilience through colonial genocide

Colonial powers have deliberately implemented policies of forced assimilation, systematically removing Indigenous children from their families and placing them in institutions intended to erase their cultures. This practice, documented across multiple settler-colonial states, including Aotearoa New Zealand, Canada, the United States, and Australia, has devastated Indigenous identities, languages, and ways of life, inflicting generational harm that continues today (Atkinson, 2002).

Colonial assimilation in global context

In Canada, the Indian residential school system operated for nearly 150 years with the explicit goal of assimilating Indigenous children into settler society (Blackstock, 2019). Generations of Indigenous children were forced to abandon their languages, spiritual practices, and cultural knowledge, leading to profound and lasting harm within Indigenous communities (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Similarly, in the United States, federal Indian boarding schools suppressed Indigenous identities, forcibly integrating American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children into mainstream American culture (US Department of the Interior, 2022). In Australia, the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, known as the Stolen Generations, caused widespread cultural dislocation and intergenerational trauma (Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997).

These global examples parallel Māori experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand, where colonial systems have targeted tamariki and rangatahi Māori since early colonisation. While the Royal Commission focused only on 1950–1999, the removal of Māori children represents an unbroken pattern that continues with increasing intensity today (Savage et al., 2021). Under the current government, the elimination of legislation requiring whānau engagement has further accelerated removals while reducing accountability (1News, 2024), abuse in care has also increased (Hanley, 2025).

This systematic, ongoing separation of tamariki from their whānau constitutes cultural genocide under international law.

Moyle (2013) and MacDonald (2023) argued how these practices directly fulfil the UN Convention's definition of genocide, which explicitly includes "forcibly transferring children of the group to another group" (UN General Assembly,1948, p. 2; Short, 2010). By severing Māori children from their reo, whakapapa, and cultural identity across generations, the state has, not only maintained, but enhanced, the mechanisms of cultural destruction. Far from being historical, these assimilation policies remain active tools of colonial control embedded within contemporary state structures, now operating with fewer constraints than before.

Erasure of Indigenous gender and sexual diversity

For Māori, colonial disruption extended beyond general cultural assimilation to specifically target takatāpui individuals. Kerekere (2017) documented how pre-colonial Māori society embraced takatāpui as integral community members within long-standing traditions of inclusion. As the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care (2024) outlines in its Chapter 3, colonial policies systematically imposed Western heteronormative frameworks, erasing this cultural acceptance and marginalising takatāpui within both Māori and wider Aotearoa New Zealand society.

This pattern of erasure appears consistently across other settler-colonial states. Over 150 pre-colonial Native American tribes recognised third genders, demonstrating widespread acceptance of diverse identities (Gilley, 2006; Human Rights Campaign, 2020). Similarly, Pacific identities like fa'afafine and fakaleitī show how Indigenous cultures integrated gender diversity into their social structures (Weedon, 2019). Colonial institutions weaponised child removal specifically to suppress these identities, forcing conformity to rigid Western gender norms (Baig, 2020).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, state and faith-based institutions targeted takatāpui, Rainbow, and MVPFAFF+ youth under the guise of rehabilitation. The *As A Kid I Always Knew Who I Was* (2023) research revealed these institutions sought to "fix" or "correct" diverse gender and sexual expressions while suppressing cultural identities, creating a compounded form of erasure (Moyle, 2023). These practices represent deliberate mechanisms for disrupting Indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality (Schaub et al., 2022).

Today, takatāpui, Rainbow, and MVPFAFF+ individuals are actively reclaiming cultural identities and restoring Indigenous knowledge systems (Fraser et al., 2022). Survivors' testimonies challenge colonial assimilation while advancing decolonisation and cultural renewal. These efforts reaffirm diverse identities within broader movements for Indigenous justice and the creation of inclusive, culturally grounded communities for future generations.

PŪ (Source)—Identity and belonging

The roots of identity

Pū represents the root source and formation of identity, who we are and who we came into this world to be. Survivors in this study affirmed that takatāpui, Rainbow, and MVPFAFF+ people have the right to define their own identities and the language that represents them.

> For me, and the whole thing ultimately, we all want a life, a life that is rich in wellness and in goodness but always being delivered in love.

For many survivors, identity is deeply tied to whakapapa, whenua, and wairua. It is not an isolated characteristic but a central aspect of self that must be acknowledged and respected in all aspects of life, particularly in care settings.

> Identity is important all throughout. Identity needs to be respected and acknowledged in care. People need control and autonomy over their identity.

Holistic cultural embodiment

Many survivors highlighted that their cultural and Rainbow or MVPFAFF+ identities are inseparable. These are not separate aspects of self but an indivisible whole that shapes how they experience the world.

> What is the relationship between Pacific cultural identities and Rainbow and MVPFAFF+ identities? I just really wanted to reinforce… everything that is stated in those two sentences are me as a whole, not me as different points.

Similarly, others described how their gender and cultural identities interact fluidly, rather than existing in separate categories.

> First and foremost, before I am fakafifine, before I am a trans woman, I am tangata Niue. And within all of that cultural identity, MVPFAFF+ identities and how they interact, they interact autonomously, like there's no separation of them.

Beyond victimhood narratives

Survivors consistently expressed that their identities are not defined by the harm they experienced. They shared their identities in positive and affirming ways before discussing harm, reinforcing that who they are matters more than what they have endured.

For some, cultural identity and gender identity are deeply tied to caregiving and whānau wellbeing.

> For Samoan, for me … and I really believe that's the major role of fa'afafine, is we are carers of our families. And how many fa'afafine I know of that have … become like the third parent.

Another described how their identities encompass multiple layers, including values, autonomy, and collective wellbeing.

> Connectivity, seeing ourselves as multiple identities that within our own rights to identify, articulate, and live, that is how our values work.

These experiences highlight the need for care systems to understand and respect the interconnected nature of identity, culture, and wellbeing.

Protective power of community

For many survivors, identity was not only a defining aspect of self but also a source of resilience. When nurtured within affirming communities, identity became a protective factor against harm.

> We know it is such a protective factor ... to be around community and to have that positive community where you're affirmed for who you are.

Whānau and community support played a crucial role in affirming identity, and some survivors rejected the notion that belonging is based solely on whakapapa.

> It's not just about blood links, genealogy or whakapapa. It's about a community of people who share those same experiences.

Survivors also spoke of the lack of cultural safety and competency in care systems, emphasising the urgent need for better support structures.

> The people who are trusted with these young peoples' lives don't have even a basic level of competency. That is so frustrating. All Oranga Tamariki staff, all those staff in those homes, need that urgently. That is a top priority.

Navigating multiple margins

Takatāpui, Rainbow, and MVPFAFF+ identities are inherently intersectional, interwoven with ethnicity, cultural identity, and other lived experiences. Survivors spoke about how these intersections contribute to

a holistic understanding of self and create a sense of connection and belonging across generations.

> As Māori we claim our identity through whakapapa, through generations of tūpuna. As takatāpui we search for our tūpuna takatāpui amongst them as we strive to see ourselves reflected in the past. By connecting with the past, we aim to enlighten our people ...

Survivors also described how institutionalisation specifically targets people at the intersections of multiple marginalised identities.

> [For some] it's their "Rainbowness" that results in them going into care, coming out can be a case for why they are placed in care [being rejected by their families].

Visibility as resistance

Survivors consistently expressed that identity is inseparable from wellbeing. They took time during the engagements to celebrate and acknowledge their own identities and those of the people around them.

> Every life is worthy. Every journey is worthy. In fact, we are God's chosen. Why?... Because we are here to teach others about humanity or lack of, about the right way to live our lives and how to treat one another as human beings.

Many reflected on the need for future generations to experience greater affirmation and safety, ensuring that their identities are celebrated rather than erased.

Rā (Enlightenment)—'hope' and vision

Illuminating the positive

Rā represents the light shed on a kaupapa through participants' pūrākau. It follows naturally from Pū, as survivors often spoke about their positive identities and aspirations before reflecting on harm. Hope was articulated through visions for community well-being, the future of care in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the restoration of mana motuhake.

> Give us back our mana motuhake. The Indigenous realm is heavily affected by the way the state and religions have imposed their power, and we must not forget that.

Survivors consistently expressed that true care must be reclaimed by the community rather than dictated by colonial structures. They emphasised the need to restore traditional roles of caregiving, ensuring that Takatāpui, Rainbow, and MVPFAFF+ individuals can care for their whānau and tamariki in ways that align with cultural values.

> We are naturally carers, we looked after our whānau, our tamariki and kaumatua before the colonials descended upon us.

> We need to support more of our queer communities to be able to do those fostering and caring roles.

Grassroots transformation

Hope was not just conceptual but grounded in action, reflected in the ways that communities support and uplift each other regardless of government involvement. Many survivors spoke about the need for self-determined spaces where their communities could design their own solutions and healing pathways.

> That for me is part of what needs to change. It is about creating space and having the courage to get out of the way.

Survivors expressed that transformation is already happening at the grassroots level, where Takatāpui, Rainbow, and MVPFAFF+ communities are actively shaping their own futures.

Parallel journeys of healing

Survivors highlighted that re-indigenisation belongs to Indigenous people and that decolonisation is a separate journey for tauiwi. They rejected tokenistic attempts at "being more Māori" and instead called for authentic engagement with Indigenous identity and cultural self-determination.

> Re-indigenisation belongs to Indigenous people; decolonisation is about tauiwi decolonising themselves. It's not about trying to be more Māori, it's about feeling comfortable in your own skin and feeling proud about that, regardless of which Indigenous culture we come from.

Many survivors reflected on decolonisation as an ongoing, internal process; one that requires articulating trauma in a way that aligns with kaupapa Māori frameworks.

> Decolonisation is huge! In order to decolonise we need to decolonise ourselves first. How do we navigate our trauma—it's not about forgetting about our trauma, but about drawing down on it, and articulating it in a way that fits your kaupapa.

A key part of this process is ensuring mana motuhake is upheld, with Indigenous communities leading decisions that affect their lives.

> Whakahokia mai te mana motuhake ki Ngāi Māori; return the land ... give us the power to know what is best for ourselves. Allow survivors to contribute to decision-making, to allow them to have a seat at the table.

These insights align with research on Indigenous self-determination and survivor-led justice movements, which emphasise that decolonisation must move beyond policy reform to structural transformation.

Intergenerational vision

Survivors expressed hope for a future where Aotearoa New Zealand embraces systemic change and builds a care system that is inclusive, affirming, and culturally grounded.

> I just love New Zealand, and I'm really hopeful that in the future we can do some of the things we are talking about here and maybe make a better future.

Hope was also grounded in gratitude, community strength, and intergenerational resilience. Survivors recognised that their journeys were not just for themselves but for those who did not survive.

> I'm thankful for survivors and the journeys that you navigate ... the contributions you make just by drawing a breath … All of you matter beyond what you know. Why? Because you're here representing those who are no longer in the world.

This hope was not naive optimism but a deeply rooted belief in transformation, built on community efforts to reclaim care, identity, and autonomy. Survivors described turning points that saved their lives, highlighting the need to shift from narratives of harm to narratives of survival, resistance, and possibility.

Ka (Past, present, future)—harm and disruption

The core violence of erasure

Ka represents the present moment from which we view the past to understand where we are going in the future. In the context of harm, survivors described the damaging impacts of societal attitudes, care settings, regulatory systems, faith-based institutions, and the state itself. Harm was not only attributed to these systems but also to individuals within them, bystanders who

chose not to act, and the collective denial of well-documented truths.

One survivor captured the core of this harm:

> I've grown up in desolation not knowing who I am, who I come from. The state took any ounce of identity or connection, I had.

This harm took many forms, affecting both individuals and communities in complex and enduring ways.

Systemic mechanisms of control

Survivors described the systemic abuses experienced by Rainbow communities, many of which were not just historical but ongoing.

> Incarceration in mental institutions for their sexuality. Incorrect diagnoses to enable commitment. Electric shock treatment and [being] drugged as punishment. Various and often intersecting forms of oppression, racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, ageism, ableism. Violence, including physical, sexual, and psychological. Exclusion and erasure. Repression of natural sexual desire, and re-education or conversion practices.

Although conversion therapy has been formally banned, survivors explained that conversion practices extended far beyond what legislation covers, embedding deeper psychological and spiritual harm into their lives.

> We have been subjected to practices that seek to "convert" us… treating sex, sexuality, and gender diversity as abnormal, unnatural, wrong, something we can change if we want to. This has involved extreme physical abuse, but also more subtle practices to undermine our dignity, autonomy, and rights to self-identify.

Faith-based institutions played a significant role in sustaining this harm, both structurally and personally.

> I experienced abuse from both the church organisation and on a personal level. My father, a local congregation leader, subjected me to severe emotional and psychological abuse.

Religious-based opposition to Rainbow inclusion continues today, particularly in education settings, where conservative faith groups actively campaign against inclusive policies.

> They're attacking the work being done in schools, organisations like Inside Out. Conservative faith groups are driving a campaign against any Rainbow teaching, pulling in other vulnerable communities to amplify their message.

Intersex survivors also described experiences of medical harm and identity erasure, particularly the lack of informed consent regarding their own bodies. For example:

> Some people find out later in life they are intersex, yet they are not told by those they need to hear it from. Taking one's identity away is a huge abuse. Interfering with someone's body when they shouldn't have.

These testimonies reveal the ongoing impact of systemic harm, violence, erasure, and institutional control, on Rainbow, takatāpui, and MVPFAFF+ lives.

Weaponising the concept of care

Harm caused by state and faith institutions is not just historical—it continues today. One participant expressed this reality:

> I live daily with the effects of state abuse in my immediate whānau… The historical abuse by churches, the impact on relationships, on how people relate to each other, is ongoing. And the ongoing state abuse at the hands of police, or Corrections. That hasn't stopped at all.

Survivors rejected the term *care* to describe the State system:

> Stop calling it "care". What a bastardisation of the term, like calling it child protection or Oranga Tamariki; it's the absolute opposite.

> The environments we are talking about in the Inquiry were never 'care'… Should we be using that term? The need for people to survive something demonstrates that care was not there.

A care-experienced advocate reinforced this failure:

> What I keep feeling is the complete lack of care from the state, there wasn't a system of care. Women were pressured to give up their children, even when there was no guarantee of a safe placement. So, what was it all about? Whenever the state takes children, they think they're doing the right thing, but they don't actually care.

Societal complicity

Survivors linked the widespread, systemic nature of abuse in care to deep-seated societal attitudes that have allowed harm to continue unchallenged.

> Unless the attitude of New Zealand is changed, there will be no change.

The burden of fighting against these harms has exhausted many in the community.

> We're exhausted. We're exhausted from fighting hatred. Those who make decisions about taking children from their cultural roots, their people, their communities, you are responsible. I don't have the luxury of not getting up again. But we are exhausted on the front line.

These testimonies expose how institutional abuse is not only historical but ongoing, rooted in the systemic dismantling of Māori society and the failure to protect those in state care.

Structural underpinnings of harm

Colonisation underpins much of the harm inflicted within the care system, shaping the isolation, punitive structures, and systemic erasure of Māori identity. Survivors highlighted disconnection from whenua as central to this loss.

> Land plays a huge part in our whakapapa. For some Māori disconnected from whānau, hapū, and iwi, they're still trying to figure out where they belong … If we had our land, we would have our connections. If we had our connections, we wouldn't have to question our own existence. Land back is huge.

One survivor reflected on how colonial disruption weakened whānau, making state intervention possible.

> If our whānau were stronger, if they hadn't been attacked for 200 years, the state couldn't do that. That has to be a big part of putting things right.

Another highlighted that harm was not incidental but systemic.

> Before we even went into care, whānau had been dismantled. The state creates poverty and struggle, then decides kids are at risk and takes them away; it's a state-fed cycle.

Whakapapa interrupted

Harm does not end with one generation, is carried through whakapapa, impacting children of survivors.

> My mum lost custody of me when I was nine. In some ways, that was positive because of the abuse she carried. Sometimes it was a hard place for a child to be.

Survivors reinforced the depth of intergenerational trauma:

> Layers upon layers of intergenerational trauma … in the context of whakapapa, it cannot be underestimated.

> Abuse transfers and manifests in different ways across generations. It stems from colonisation, from poverty. It's in learned behaviours, in love that is not shown. Discrimination research shows physiological effects can even be passed on to children.

Many described the removal of mokopuna as deliberate, an act of genocide. An example:

> The breaches of te Tiriti o Waitangi and the enormity of the impact on whānau Māori across generations require their own Royal Commission of Inquiry.

Despite the harm they have endured, survivors refused to be defined by abuse. Throughout the engagements, they spoke of hope, identity, and the urgency for change.

Ū (Sustenance)aspirations for transformative change

Beyond performative listening

Ū represents the sustenance provided by Papatūānuku, embodying the idea that what we nurture today sustains tomorrow. In this context, it reflects the aspirations of Takatāpui, Rainbow, and MVPFAFF+ survivors, their whānau, and advocates for transformative change. Their voices highlight the future they seek for Aotearoa, one that centres mana, rangatiratanga, and structural accountability.

> The biggest thing, is to have people listen, listen to understand, don't listen to respond.

Reclaiming decision-making authority

Survivors called for the end of state control over whānau and communities, demanding that tamariki and rangatahi remain with their whānau instead of being placed in state care.

> We've just got to stop ... need to stop putting people in places, to live with strangers, to be looked after.

The state's paternalistic approach has repeatedly failed, causing ongoing harm to generations of Māori and Rainbow communities.

> Remove the abusers, not our babies! Our tamariki should remain at home in their communities with their nannies and multigenerational caregivers.

Survivors asserted that whānau should receive the necessary resources and support to care for their own children, instead of having them forcibly removed into harmful care systems.

Meaningful accountability

Many expressed deep scepticism about apologies from the state and institutions, recognising that previous apologies have failed to create meaningful change.

> Part of putting it right is making genuine apologies … you can only tell if it is genuine when their behaviour changes.

Some felt that apologies primarily serve institutional interests rather than addressing the actual harm experienced by survivors.

> I know the state wants to make an apology because it is going to make them feel better.

Survivors stressed that true accountability requires systemic reform, not just symbolic apologies.

Dismantling colonial power structures

Survivors called for the dismantling of colonial structures, highlighting that state

abuse is ongoing and continues to uphold the power of settler institutions.

> The abuse of the state is still ongoing … the only way that I can think that we can stop these impacts is to remove the power.

Calls for decolonisation focused on tauiwi taking responsibility for their role in these systems and returning power to tangata whenua.

> Decolonisation is about tauiwi decolonising themselves... it's about feeling comfortable in your own skin.

By us, for us: self-determined healing

Survivors strongly advocated for self-determined solutions, where they have full control over their own healing pathways and community-based support systems.

> Survivors can take care of themselves, work for themselves, have access to the resources they are entitled to, to design their own solutions and their own healing pathways.

Institutions must create space for survivors and step aside, rather than imposing external interventions.

> Just have the courage to get out of the way … and stop taking up our space.

Transforming cultural foundations

Survivors urged for a broader cultural shift to prevent ongoing harm, particularly within institutions such as schools and churches, where toxic cultures enable abuse to continue unchecked.

> Sexual abuse incidents will still happen, but hopefully a lot less if you take away the culture that allows them to keep happening.

This shift requires active engagement with survivor experiences, rather than surface-level reforms that leave harmful structures intact.

Faith-based institutional reform

Survivors demanded significant changes in how churches operate, including:

- Stripping charitable status from churches that uphold harmful practices:
  > Churches shouldn't be given tax-free rights... because of the way they treat a group of people as a second-rate group.
- Implementing oversight mechanisms to monitor faith-based institutions:
  > There needs to be an organisation auditing churches... if you're not cheering for New Zealand then you don't get it.
- Establishing mandatory ethical guidelines for clergy:
  > In order to have charitable status, your pastors must sign up to a code of ethics. It's just simple stuff.
- Providing reparations for harm caused to Rainbow communities:
  > Churches need to make reparation to the Rainbow community, proper psycho-social support for people who have been through conversion practices.

Survivors made it clear that churches must be held to the same standards as other institutions, ensuring accountability for past and ongoing harm.

Resource sovereignty

Many survivors advocated for sustainable funding for Rainbow and MVPFAFF+ organisations, recognising that these groups carry the burden of support but are often underfunded.

> Rainbow organisations deserve the support. We are doing the mahi, but often the funding doesn't come through in the right ways.

To ensure long-term change, survivors highlighted the need for scholarships and funding opportunities that enable more Rainbow and Takatāpui professionals to enter counselling, mental health, and support services.

> We need grants and scholarships to enable Pasifika, Māori, and other Rainbow people to become counsellors or mental health support.

Transparent reconciliation processes

Survivors demanded transparency and accountability from the state, particularly regarding historical abuse and records access.

> People have a right to know who harmed them, who violated their tapu, their wairua.

They also called for ongoing monitoring of harm, particularly within faith-based institutions.

> There needs to be someone maintaining a list of churches still doing conversion practices.

Survivors were clear that transformative systems change is necessary, ensuring that harmful structures are not just reformed but fully dismantled.

Discussion: Truth-telling and transformation

Survivors' testimonies illuminate both systemic harm and pathways toward healing. Their experiences reveal how state- and faith-based institutions specifically targeted Takatāpui, Rainbow and MVPFAFF+ people at the intersection of cultural identity and gender/sexual diversity, creating compounded forms of discrimination and erasure.

Social work has functioned as a key mechanism of cultural genocide, acting as an enforcement arm of colonial systems that remove tamariki from whakapapa, pathologise Māori whānau, and frame structural violence as protection. This complicity continues through Oranga Tamariki and other Crown agencies, where survivors identified profound competency gaps in supporting takatāpui, Rainbow, and MVPFAFF+ rangatahi, who described these harms directly, pointing to systemic failures in care and the erasure of their identities (Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in State Care, 2024).

The profound contradiction in state care becomes evident: while agencies claim caregiver shortages, they simultaneously maintain discriminatory barriers that prevent Takatāpui, Rainbow and MVPFAFF+ people from fulfilling their traditional caregiving roles. As one survivor pointedly expressed: "The hypocrisy of Oranga Tamariki, they scream for caregivers, but they really want straight living nuclear family types, whilst blocking queer and trans folk from having kids in our care." For those who are both Māori and takatāpui, this creates a double discrimination that compounds barriers to reconnecting tamariki with affirming care environments.

This research highlights several key insights with significant implications:

First, the Pū Rā Ka Ū framework reveals how identity, hope, harm and transformation interconnect in survivors' lived experiences. Their testimonies demonstrate that reclaiming identity serves as both healing and resistance against colonial erasure.

Second, survivors consistently articulate alternatives to harmful systems, grounded in traditional caregiving roles and Indigenous knowledge systems. Their collective vision demands, not tokenistic acknowledgement, but fundamental restructuring of how decisions about care are made.

Third, transformative change requires dismantling systems that continue to marginalise Māori and Rainbow communities under the guise of protection. Survivors' calls for decolonisation include returning land to tangata whenua, recognising Indigenous-led solutions, and ensuring tauiwi confront their role in upholding colonial structures.

These findings have profound implications for social work education and practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. The profession must critically examine its ongoing participation in systems that remove tamariki Māori from whakapapa while preventing takatāpui caregivers from supporting their communities. Transformative practice requires supporting traditional caregiving roles, recognising intersectional identities, and prioritising community-led approaches that affirm cultural connection.

Conclusion: Honouring pūrākau, demanding justice

This research documents both the harm inflicted on takatāpui, Rainbow and MVPFAFF+ communities and their vision for transformation. Survivors' testimonies reveal how colonial systems deliberately targeted those at the intersection of cultural and gender/sexual diversity, using care systems as mechanisms of control and assimilation.

The purpose of this work is not to centre social work, but to create a platform where survivors of state-imposed erasure can speak directly to systems that have shaped their lives. By amplifying these voices without institutional filtration, this article honours their expertise in defining both problems and solutions.

As Ngāti Porou, a survivor, takatāpui, a social worker and researcher, a parent and grandparent, my lived experiences shape this work. This research is a contribution to my diverse communities and whānau, weaving together voices that demand rangatiratanga and justice. The weight of dislocation and trauma is not lost on me, nor is the strength found in connection, survival and collective voice.

I am reminded of my son's words at 8 years old, growing up within a Rainbow community:

> You guys are sheroes, Mum, because how would we know what it's like if you didn't live your lives and share your stories?

These pūrākau of harm, healing, hope and change offer a roadmap for the future. By centring survivor knowledge as the foundation for transformation, we honour those of our rainbow and takatāpui whānau who came before us, affirm who we are now, and contribute to a future where our communities thrive with their connections to whakapapa intact.

Future work must continue this kaupapa, expanding opportunities for survivor-led research, creating pathways for intergenerational healing, and ensuring that policies and practices genuinely reflect the aspirations of those most affected. Only then can we move toward true justice, not as an abstract concept, but as lived reality grounded in mana motuhake, safety and dignity.

Received: 7 February 2025

Accepted: 14 May 2025

Published: 12 June 2025

Note

[1] Te Whariki Manawāhine O Hauraki (Te Whāriki) is a tangata whenua social service that has been in operation for 40 years, based in Thames, Hauraki. The author of this study is the Director of Te Whāriki's research unit.

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