Greetings from the Fund Team. We are very excited to share with you, the Fund’s first newsletter. Featured in this newsletter are five of our grantees which include Rise Beyond the Reef, Survival Advocacy Network, Ra Naari Parishad and Aging with Empowerment and Dignity and Naitasiri Women in Dairy. Under the Fund’s first call for funding, we are supporting eighteen women’s groups, networks and organisations in Fiji. Apart from the five grantees who are featured, we are also working with femLINK Pacific, House of Sarah, Medical Services Pacific, Women in Fisheries Network, Partners in Community Development Fiji, Reproductive Family Health Association of Fiji, Fiji Girl Guides Association, Delailasakau Women’s Group, Pacific Sexual Gender Diversity Network, Women’s Wing of the Fiji Trade Union Congress, Fiji Disabled People’s Federation, Fiji Association of the Deaf and Sign Interpreters Association Fiji.

Over the past few months, the Fund Team has also been busy conducting information sessions about the Fund’s 2nd Call for Funding. The Fund was able to reach a total of 803 people during the information sessions which were conducted in Suva, Lautoka, Labasa, Savusavu, Rotuma, Vanua Balavu and Levuka. The Fund received a total of 195 expressions of interest applications which are now currently being assessed by the Grants Committee. In the coming weeks, we will be hosting the second Fiji Country Reflection Workshop in partnership with Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development. The workshop will bring together over 50 participants who are part of the Fund’s grantees and partners to connect, share, learn and organise collective action ‘for gender equality and women’s rights’ in Fiji.

In solidarity,
Michelle Reddy

About the Fund

The Fiji Women’s Fund (the Fund) is an initiative of the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (Pacific Women) Program. The Fund will commit up to AU$10.5 million from 2017 to 2022. It will provide funding and capacity development support to women’s groups, networks, and organisations in Fiji to expand and enhance their work on women’s empowerment and gender equality. The aim of the Fund is to become an independently funded and managed women’s fund by the end of 2022, and it seeks the following outcomes:

- Women’s groups, organisations, or networks supported by the Fund are empowered and have the capacity (knowledge, skills, resources and relationships) to contribute to transformative change that improves women’s lives.
- Women’s groups, organisations, or networks supported by the Fund are having influence at different levels (individual / systemic and formal / informal) and are contributing to transformative change in women’s lives.
- The Fund has transitioned to an independent local entity and has secured funding from donors, private sector, and local philanthropy.
- The Fund works towards reaching women living in rural and remote locations and those who are marginalised, including women with disabilities and those facing discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- The Fund contributes to the Fiji National Women’s Plan of Action and the National Gender Policy, the Beijing Platform for Action, Pacific Leaders’ Gender Equality Declaration (2012) and Sustainable Development Goals 2030.
Grantee Stories

Ra Naari Parishad (RNP)
Project name: The Rural Women Lifeskills Programme
Project timeframe: 1 year

Ra Naari Parishad, a local community organisation established in 1989, works with women and girls in the Ra community to support economic empowerment, promote leadership and promote involvement of rural women and girls in decision-making processes.

Supporting women in rural and remote communities in Ra has been the mainstay of the Ra Naari Parishad since it was established in 1989. As a current grantee of the Fiji Women’s Fund, Ra Naari receives support for its Rural Women Lifeskills Programme.

This programme is the precursor to what members of Ra Naari Parishad have planned. The Lifeskills programme aims to empower the women through skills development, increasing their expertise. In doing so, women will be able to diversify the source of household income and build networks of support and their range of products and service provision.

With the Fund’s assistance, Ra Naari is working towards becoming a social enterprise where the skills the women learn can be used to generate income on a larger organised scale. And this model will allow them to employ staff and volunteers and reduce reliance on a sole donor.

Ra Naari has 12 affiliate clubs and women’s groups located in and around Rakiraki. Members work together to empower women and involve them in decision making and leadership in their communities.

The Nanuku/Wailevu Women’s Group is one such group, led by retired school teacher, Sunitra Mishra. The group has supported community members in various ways including during times of a disaster.

“During the recent flooding in Ra, we assisted those who were affected. Previously, we’ve also provided financial assistance to the sick and contributed to the rebuilding of the temple after Cyclone Winston,” said Sunitra.

Majority of the Ra Naari members sell home-made chutney and craft to raise the funds and support their work in the community. Members work together to empower women and involve them in decision making and leadership roles in their communities.

With assistance from the Fund, Ra Naari has ventured into beekeeping and Sunitra is pleased that their community was selected as one of the sites for the 30 beehives, which will eventually be distributed to other groups and clubs.

“We are learning a lot about beekeeping and looking forward to our first harvest of honey. This new project has given us the confidence to think about going into small scale poultry maybe later this year,” said Sunitra.

With support from the Fund, Ra Naari has also employed a Project Officer- Daventri Mudaliar, a former Ra Naari volunteer. Daventri has been working closely with Ra Naari members and is excited about the changes she has seen.

The training sessions and the activities have added value to the activities and the lives of members and according to Daventri, has attracted new members in a span of four months.

“We now have 125 members compared to 110 since I came on board in March 2018 and you can really see then changes in the women’s lives when they attend our meetings and training sessions,” said Daventri.

The Fund supports Ra Naari with bee-keeping, financial literacy and child minding training sessions supported by the Fund. Additionally, oratory competitions organised by Ra Naari have become quite popular with its members.

“We have oratory competitions during our meetings and women have gained so much confidence when they speak. We are very fortunate that our husbands and sons help us with the work we do,” Daventri explained.
Women in Dairy Naitasiri- Empowering women economically through leadership and collective action
Project name: Strengthening Naitasiri Women in Dairy Group
Project timeframe: 1 year

Naitasiri Women in Dairy Group is a newly established women’s group, formed in June 2017 by a group of women dairy farmers to share dairy farming knowledge, issues, challenges and experiences encountered as women in a traditionally male dominated industry. The Naitasiri Women in Dairy Group comprises of 33 women who own or manage family run dairy farms in the province of Naitasiri on Viti Levu. Working collectively, the group aims to improve daily milk production and sustain income to enhance livelihoods of its members. The group has received support and technical assistance from stakeholders such as the Ministry of Agriculture for veterinarian services.

The Naitasiri Women in Dairy Group began when women dairy owners and managers decided to help fellow women dairy farmers who had fewer resources and needed assistance on their farms to become fully fledged dairy farmers. The group has organised themselves into working groups and meet every Monday to work on a member’s farm, weeding paddocks and planting grass for cows.

Prior to the assistance from the Fund, women would walk 2-3 kilometres from their homes to a selected farm to work, have lunch and meet and discuss group activities and finances. Through support from the Fund they now travel by truck to their work site saving them time, enabling them to do more work on their farms and return home early.

The Fund also assisted the group to purchase equipment and protective wear such as gumboots and raincoats for the women, and funded the construction of can stands at each member’s farm. These small structures are where milk cans are placed for collection by Fiji Dairy Limited.

“Before we would put them by the side of the road, where the quality of the milk is affected by the heat of the sun, or it can be knocked over by animals or people and our efforts are wasted and money is lost,” said Emali Radiniyacata, a founding member of the NWDG.

Group member, Vasitia Buloulala is a recipient of the collective farm work that the women do. Her husband is housebound due to illness and she runs their farm.

“With the group’s assistance, we cleared a lot of land that we can now use for pasture. I am now able to care for our 17 milking cows, earn money and take care of my family’s needs,” said Vasitia.

The Fund also provided financial literacy and governance training for the group. “With these training opportunities, we are able to identify how to run our group, monitor our funds, do banking, and manage our petty cash,” said Susan Pocock, who is the Group President.

The Group has used the concept of collective work known as solesolevaki (solesolevaki in the itaukei culture means collective work) to start their initiative, merged with financial literacy and organisation governance skills to further their business interests.
AWED is a support group for aging women over 50 years. It was founded in 2017 by two aging friends who were concerned that their issues were not being addressed by state policies. The group is governed by a 10-member interim steering committee made up of aging professional women with varying work experiences ranging from accounting, legal, management and peace building. AWED is working towards enhancement of the quality of life for aging women in Fiji by highlighting their needs, advocating for their rights, and facilitating learning and knowledge sharing amongst aging women.

All individuals experience the aging process, and in Fiji, it is not uncommon for many women to associate aging with negative changes and decline.

Seeing their wives, sisters and mothers actively involved has changed mind-sets of men. “Before when we started, I couldn’t see any men even in the household when we go do the work. Now I can see that they are coming in. So it has given them more open ideas and has opened the doors for us women in a traditional society,” said Susan.

“We thank the Fund for the support, for the training, for giving us the opportunity to be empowered and strengthening women to take up decision-making in the group to be good leaders.”

However, one women’s support group has emerged to challenge and change this perception by developing interventions that have a positive impact on the aging experience of women around the country.

Aging with Empowerment and Dignity (AWED) is a women’s support group that was founded in 2017 by two retired friends and activists, Lorraine Foster and Priscilla Singh, who over a cup of coffee, decided it was time to stand together and break the mould of the cultural barriers and perception of aging women in Fiji.

“We realised that there were so many issues and challenges for aging citizens. It was then that we decided to bring a group of women together to address aging women’s issues and initiate support mechanisms to help them and help one another,” Lorraine explained.

Loneliness, abuse (verbal, financial and physical) and neglect by family members are some of the issues that elderly women and men face. Cases have been referred to AWED by friends, and by the public who learned of AWED’s work by word of mouth.

Lorraine explained, ‘It is saddening to hear about these cases, and that they are increasing. Cases are often not reported and kept confidential due to stigma.

AWED members through their networks assist women who face such abuse and discrimination by referring them to relevant services.

Fiji’s 2017 national census indicates that women account for 51.4% of the 60-64 age group and close to 60% in the 75+ age group indicating longevity – significant statistics that is driving AWED’s work through its Fiji Women’s funded project ‘Dealing with Aging as Woman in Fiji’ focused on organisational strengthening and coalition building to advocate for aging women.
Lorraine explained they are aware that the Fijian population is aging rapidly, “So we are saying that now, governments, companies even individuals should start changing their policies, their laws, their processes, even the way they think.”

According to Lorraine, “The aging population is perceived in the public eye as sometimes non-existent, they’re old and they stay at home. This results in policies and processes made for and implemented for the aging population without consulting them.”

AWED’s initial experience with securing funding for their start-up support group was challenging. “Despite the wealth of experience and qualifications of AWED’s members, I remember that when we were trying to advocate for AWED, and the support from the Fiji Women’s Fund was encouraging and timely. They’ve helped us a lot to bring together potential members and specifically the board to formalise the organisation structure. We now have policies and procedures and hope to expand our membership and activities throughout Fiji.” said Lorraine.

Thirty women, retired civil servants, accountants, lawyers and principals attended the first dialogue and they all agreed that they wanted to collectively provide a safe space, a voice and helping hand to aging people. A quick calculation revealed that the 30 women had close to 900 years of work experience – an impressive resume!

According to Lorraine, AWED members are experienced retirees and living with dignity in their twilight years and this was evident at the meeting, “These women spoke with knowledge and experience, so our message to the younger population is that (as aging women) we still have a lot to offer. Given our knowledge and wealth of experience, recognising us as a part of the population of Fiji will benefit everyone,” said Lorraine.

To date, AWED’s participation in various Fiji Women’s Fund capacity building sessions has also provided the group with advocacy opportunities. As a result two other Fund grantees have indicated their interest in including aging women in their projects.

“I think it’s vital that aging women or the aging population in general must have a voice too in the community because statistics show that the aging population is growing in Fiji,” said Lorraine.

The Fiji Women’s Fund is proud to partner with AWED in their journey to empower and support aging women to enjoy their golden years in good health, with dignity, self-fulfillment, equality and economic security.

The Survival Advocacy Network (SAN) was established in 2009 through the Scarlet Alliance Programme. SAN focuses on empowering lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) sex workers communities in Fiji to ensure they are able to work and live in a safe environment. SAN also aims to eliminate stigma and discrimination against sex workers.

The Survival Advocacy Network (SAN) was established in 2009 through the Scarlet Alliance Programme. SAN is led by LGBT sex workers who have been advocating for the full protection and rights of LGBT sex workers.

LGBT sex workers are marginalised and often targets of violence and discrimination and work in an unsafe environment as the Fiji Crimes Decree classifies sex work as loitering which creates an unsafe environment for LGBT sex workers.

With the support of the Fiji Women’s Fund, SAN is working on achieving the mission of empowering members so they may work and live in a safe environment and working with partners to eliminate the stigma and discrimination against sex workers. The Fund supports SAN under the “Strengthening women’s groups and coalitions for change” thematic area.
According to SAN Project Coordinator, Sesenieli Naitala, socio-economic challenges members face were compounded by the difficulty SAN faced in raising money to keep their centre doors open.

“We didn’t have any funding from other organisations, funders and donors, so I brought some former sex workers together regularly to fundraise and secure our centre space,” Sesenieli explained.

For now SAN is focused on sustaining the advocacy centre and providing support for members while strengthening the network through its outreach programme.

The centre provides a safe space for members and during their visits, the SAN team are able to provide peer support and counselling “This place is helping those sex workers that have many work stresses and can’t share their problems. There are a lot of changes that I have seen, before they used to be too shy to come up and talk about sex workers’ issues in public” said Sesenieli.

Sesenieli said support from the Fund has enabled SAN to focus on advocacy with civil society and government ministries. SAN plans to host a dialogue on the theme “Leave no one behind” where sex workers can share their experiences and identify solutions to issues they face in the course of their work.

Sesenieli said the Fiji Women’s Fund is contributing to organisational strengthening, providing opportunities for members to attend training on financial management, child protection and monitoring and evaluation, which is important as the members do not have any formal qualifications.

Sesenieli has noticed the positive changes for members who have benefited from support by the Fiji Women’s Fund, they are more confident and have more positive perceptions of themselves. These changes are key to help in their role in advocating for LGBT sex worker rights.

**Rise Beyond the Reef (RBTR)**

**Project name: Economic & Leadership Development for Rural Remote Women, Fiji**

**Project timeframe: 2 years**

Rise Beyond the Reef, founded in 2013, addresses unique development needs for rural remote Pacific communities, improving women and children’s lives through ecologically sustainable income-generating projects. These projects utilise traditional skills and materials, addressing gender inequalities, building women leaders, and empowering women and girl survivors of domestic violence. Rise Beyond the Reef operates at the local level, in municipalities or groups within a division.

The women of Nabukadra, Namarai and Verevere villages in Nakorotubu, Ra know too well the difficulties of trying to earn money to look after their families and meet traditional and church obligations.

For generations, they have relied on selling coconuts at the Suva market and look forward to fruit seasons each year because it means additional income for their communities. However it also involves a lot of hard work.

“We have to first look for the coconuts or fruit we want to sell, then we have to bring them to the village for loading onto trucks and then make the six to eight hour round trip to the market,” said Seraserini Kilivou of Nabukadra village.

For a woman to sell at the Suva market, she needs to have at least FJ$30 on hand to make the journey, this covers her fare and cargo cost, “and if we do not have good sales, then we return with almost nothing, after two days of preparation and a day at the market, but that is how things were,” Sereseini explained.

Seraseini’s story is echoed by women from Namarai and Verevere villages who for years have being doing what they can to support their families. In 2016, when category five Tropical Cyclone (TC) Winston tore through Fiji, the district of Nakorotubu was among the worst hit.

In this context, Rise Beyond the Reef began working with women in five villages in Nakorotubu in the wake of TC Winston, training them to produce high quality craft and supplying raw material where necessary. As a current grantee of the Fiji Women’s Fund Rise Beyond the Reef is
receiving support to implement its Economic & Leadership Development for Rural Remote Women Programme.

Nabukadra village
Sereseini has since traded her market vendor duties for the role of Rise Beyond the Reef’s Coordinator for Nabukadra village, a role she has held for a year now. She manages 30 members whose ages range from 20-50.

“Our involvement with Rise Beyond the Reef has taught us new skills, we work together to make masi for wine bags, we also print material. Rise Beyond the Reef supplies the equipment and material for the printing and we work hard because we know we have a guaranteed market for what we do,” said Sereseini.

Miriama Tamana is also from Nabukadra village and has, over the years, seen the effects of climate change. She spoke of the scarcity of fruits, crops and marine life that villagers rely on and sell to generate income and is thankful for the assistance provided by Rise Beyond the Reef, “We look forward to the orders and increasing our production because it helps us support our families.”

Namarai village
Namarai is located on a small peninsula on the Nakorotubu coast and bore the brunt of TC Winston- “Winston destroyed everything, our homes and what we sold at the markets. For two years we had nothing to sell, we had to replant for our families, rebuild our homes, it was like starting over again-with nothing,” said Marisela Adiveiba, President of the Namarai Village Women’s Association.

“The hall we work in now is the one we fled to when the cyclone came, 30 houses were damaged in Namarai,” said Marisela. Pointing to the door and windows, she recalled villagers’ cries as waves crashed into the building destroying doors and windows.

The women of Namarai, who initially wove baskets, now focus on printing material because their pandanus gardens were badly affected by Winston. Marisela explained that one of the highlights of the work they do is that they do not have to travel to earn money, they work in the village hall on allocated days or depending on the orders they receive.

Twenty-four women in the 19-60 year age group are involved in the Rise Beyond the Reef project at Namarai. They are split into five groups and the work is given to each group on a rotational basis so all members have an opportunity to earn.

Verevere village
“When we see stones lying around the village, on the coast and in the riverbed, we pay more attention now than we did before,” Miriama Lewa said with a laugh. Miriama is the Rise Beyond the Reef Coordinator for Verevere village and she was referring to the painted stones that are sold at Rise Beyond outlets.

The Fund caught up with Miriama and the 24 women who make up the Verevere project as they were painting stones and weaving baskets at the Verevere village hall, “We allocate tasks according to what the women are interested in doing, and if someone wants to learn something new, we refer them to the District Coordinator for training.”

Stone painting and weaving baskets are a welcome change to selling at the Suva Market for most of the women, who now have the pleasure of working whilst surrounded by their children and grandchildren.

Temalesi Vere, District Coordinator based in Verevere, was also amongst the women. Temalesi is responsible for the quality control checks, orders and queries from the women and village coordinators for Verevere, Nabukadra and Namarai.

“I visit the five villages in the district which are remote and the bus only comes once a day. But the Rise Beyond team help us transport the products,” said Temalesi.

Wine bags, printed material, paper necklaces, jewellery boxes, laundry baskets and painted stones are the products that Temalesi inspects, “part of my job is to ensure that the women have the material and tools they need to create these products.

“Rise Beyond the Reef came to the villages just after TC Winston and helped us get back on our feet. We learnt new things and now rely on the fortnightly orders to get cash to support our families,” she explained.

The women unanimously agree that while their remote rural location, coupled with the post-TC Winston recovery affected their ability to provide for their families, the training and support provided by Rise Beyond the Reef following TC Winston has made all the difference to their lives, in particular to raise their families.
WHAT’S ON THIS MONTH

Pacific Women and Fiji Women’s Fund Country Reflection Workshop on
24th – 26th October 2018

Proposal Writing Workshop for 2nd Call for Funding
9th November 2018

Launch of Annual Progress Report and Introduction of 2nd Call for Funding grantees
8th March 2019

Ph. +679 331 4410 or +679 331 4033
Email: info@womensfund.org.fj

Daventri Mudaliar, Project Officer at Ra Naari Parishad at the Nanuku and Wailevu Women’s Group bee hive site.