

The Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Fund Fiji Grantee Partners



WOMEN'S
FUND
FIJI



WOMEN'S
FUND
FIJI

The Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Fund Fiji Grantee Partners



Preferred citation: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Fund Fiji Grantee Partners

Authors: Rochelle Jones, Erica Lee, Michelle Reddy

Photos: Rob Rickman/Women's Fund Fiji

Copyright: Women's Fund Fiji, 2021

For further information, please contact:

Women's Fund Fiji

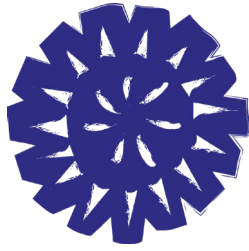
Phone: +679 +679 330 1220 or +679 330 1221

Email: information@womensfundfiji.org

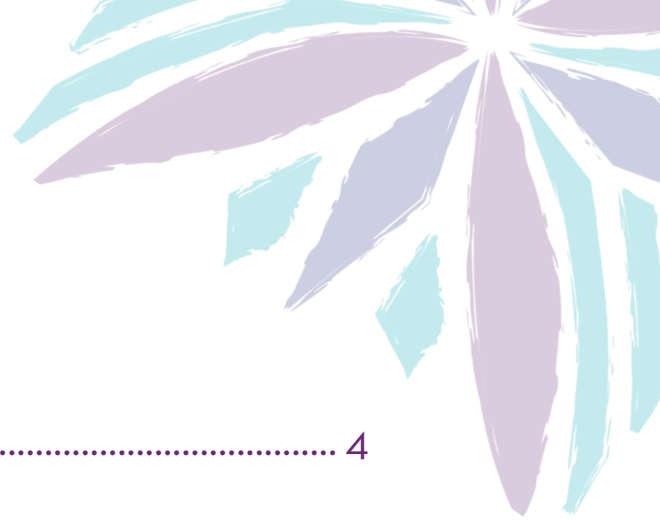
The views expressed in this publication are the author's alone and do not necessarily represent the views of Women's Fund Fiji's funders.

About Us

Women's Fund Fiji (the Fund) is the Pacific's first national women's Fund. The Fund is an empathetic and adaptive feminist fund working to influence and mobilise financial and non-financial resources for feminist and women's rights organisations and movements, so they can progress the human rights of women, girls, and gender non-conforming people in Fiji. The Fund is registered as an independent entity under Fiji's Charitable Trust Act.



Content



Introduction 4

Context..... 4

Section 1: The Impacts6

- 1.1 Gendered and structural considerations..... 7
- 1.2 Increased gender-based violence 9
- 1.3 Location-based impacts..... 10
- 1.4 Economic and livelihood impacts..... 11
- 1.5 Information and services impacts 13

Section 2: The Responses16

- 2.1 Grantee responses: adaptations and shifts 17
 - ◆ EAW responses 17
 - ◆ Geographic ‘workarounds’ 17
 - ◆ Economic pivots/innovations..... 18
 - ◆ Provision of information/services 19
- 2.2 Collective and movement responses 20
 - ◆ Grantee partner collaborations..... 21
 - ◆ CSO collaborations 22
 - ◆ Other responses and collaborations 22
 - ◆ How the Fund responded - and some key learnings 22





Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has impacted almost every aspect of our lives - from the system level all the way down to our interactions with loved ones. Women's Fund Fiji (the Fund) works with **38 grantee partners** across Fiji. Throughout this challenging time, we have been in dialogue with our grantee partners, learning how COVID-19 has impacted their unique realities and what we as a funder can do to better meet their needs. In addition, the Fund has documented a feminist analysis of existing disparities in Fiji's socio-economic and cultural fabric that the onset of COVID-19 has exacerbated.

This report begins by situating Fiji's COVID-19 experiences with other regions, highlighting the similarities and also unique experiences from Fiji. Following this, we present the impacts of COVID-19 on feminist and women's rights movements in Fiji over the 2020-2021 period: starting with our feminist analysis of existing disparities that COVID-19 has exacerbated, which frames our grantee partners experiences; then moving on to the key impact areas our grantee partners have highlighted - based on their reflections, learnings, and experiences with COVID-19 to date. The next section focuses on how our grantee partners and women's rights and feminist movements in Fiji have responded to these impacts - summarising the shifts and adaptations, resilience, and new challenges faced. Finally, we present our key learnings and recommendations as we wade forward.

Context

Millions of women, girls and gender non-conforming people around the world are facing heightened insecurity, violence, and other exacerbated socio-economic hardships due to COVID-19. Gender equality analysis of the pandemic began to emerge around the middle of 2020, with some suggesting the pandemic would be a step backwards for gender equality worldwide. With the hardest-hit sectors being social and service industries and the informal sector - comprising a majority of women - the gendered ramifications were predicted to be dire.

One year later and we are seeing and experiencing these predicted impacts, but the analysis has become much more nuanced as the data and stories have been rolling in - learning about, for example, the impacts of COVID-19 on specific populations such as marginalised groups, or how the pandemic has widened existing structural inequalities or aggravated other issues, like gender-based violence (GBV)¹.

Called the 'shadow pandemic,' violence against women in particular has intensified due to COVID-19 restrictions that have forced women and girls to stay home, trapped with their abusers; diverted resources to deal with the crisis; and severe disruptions to GBV services. Existing gendered gaps in internet connectivity and mobile phone ownership in low- and middle-income countries, impacts the issue further. This is because during the pandemic many GBV services were forced to transition to phone or internet-based, and in 2020, there were still "over 300 million fewer women than men accessing the internet on a mobile."

Turning to the pandemic's economic impacts, in East and Southern Africa, a recent study found that while 60% of both men and women either lost all of their income or had it significantly reduced, "women who were economically active prior to the pandemic were more likely than men

¹ UN Women has developed a [dedicated webpage](#) that outlines the key impacts of COVID-19 on women and girls worldwide.



to transition into unemployment/not economically active.” The same study also found that “women and youth with disabilities, sex workers, and people living with HIV/AIDS were more likely to experience victimisation and stigmatisation during the pandemic. Those not associated with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were less likely to receive preventative and other COVID-19 related support and information and likely to be even more marginalised than before as scarce resources are re-prioritised.”

For LGBTQIA+ communities around the world, COVID-19 has brought to light the stigma and gaps in social protection measures they face worldwide. For instance, in a series of focus groups recently hosted by the [Global Health Council](#), participants highlighted how “gendered policies during lockdown and triage made transgender individuals even more vulnerable”; and that “sex workers have been left out of unemployment benefits and assistance because they are not recognised as legitimate workers.”

In the Asia Pacific region where women already spend 4.1 times more time than men on unpaid care work, this has been exacerbated by COVID-19 with the impacts varying in different countries. In Southeast Asia, “even in a double income household, women inadvertently take up the greater share of household responsibilities, including home-based learning with the majority of schools being shut. These responsibilities, on top of their own remunerated work, have increased their stress and compromised their psychological well-being.”

In Fiji, struggles like the above are all too familiar for women, girls, and gender non-conforming people.



In the Asia Pacific region where women already spend 4.1 times more time than men on unpaid care work, this has been exacerbated by COVID-19 with the impacts varying in different countries.






SECTION 1

THE IMPACTS

1.1 Gendered and structural considerations

The impacts of any disaster or crisis that strikes a community are dependent on the foundations and structures that community is built upon. Any lurking or unresolved disparities and power imbalances will surface as soon as disaster strikes. Existing oppressions will be heightened, and vulnerable groups will be hardest hit. We have witnessed this situation time and time again in different contexts around the world.

Research shows that humanitarian crises most often affect women, girls, and gender non-conforming people disproportionately. Pre-existing gender inequality and discrimination tend to be further aggravated due to sudden shifts in gender roles and relations. Gendered social norms affect women's and girls' ability to make decisions, to propose solutions, and to lead, constraining their lives and choices. In addition, they affect the ability of households and wider communities to recover from crises².



According to a rapid assessment prepared in April 2020 by the COVID-19 Response Gender Working Group, the context of the early COVID-19 pandemic in Fiji was as follows:

Vast gender inequalities exist across every realm of economic participation in Fiji. The number of people employed in Fiji disaggregated by gender is 234,059 for men and 106,680 for women. A large proportion of the population is concentrated in informal employment, comprising 48% of the population, with over two thirds of all informal workers coming from rural areas (67%). 19% of businesses are registered by women, most of which focus on micro and small businesses. Young women's participation is half that of young men, with women (15-34 years) having a labour participation rate of 33% compared with their male counterparts at 67%. 62% of Lesbian Bisexual and Trans (LBT) women and gender non-conforming people are unemployed and in precarious work.



This framework, within which COVID-19 entered, meant that disparities worsened in some cases, and marginalised groups became even more vulnerable. Fiji's first detected COVID-19 case was announced on 19 March 2020, followed by government-imposed restrictions: a lockdown of Lautoka City, nightly curfews (10pm - 5am and later, 8pm - 5am), and the suspension of all operations deemed unessential. Within two weeks of the Government's announcement, global cases soared, and international borders quickly shut down to contain and prevent the spread. Exacerbating the impact of COVID-19, Fiji experienced a category 4 tropical cyclone which caused widespread flooding in low lying areas, damage to properties, one recorded death, and food security issues.

As the pandemic progressed into 2021, with a second wave hitting in the middle of the year, Fiji residents had to navigate further restrictions such as containment zones - where people could not cross into certain areas - and ongoing curfews (6pm - 4am then 12pm - 4am). These restrictions caused major disruptions, like in other parts of the world, and already existing structural oppressions and policy gaps in Fiji became more obvious.

For example, the Fijian Government took steps to try and mitigate the economic and social impacts of the pandemic, but some of **these measures excluded or did not take into account the needs of women and gender non-conforming people**. For instance, the Fijian Government allowed people to access their retirement savings via the national superannuation fund. However, a major portion of the population either do not have retirement savings or do not benefit from recognised social protection measures (such as sex workers, market vendors and rural fishers to name a few). Another example is the [Protocols for COVID-safe business operations](#) imposed by the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport. These protocols actually made it harder for women - especially those operating micro, small and medium enterprises - to reopen their businesses.

COVID-19 mitigation strategies also had a huge **impact on the already high incidence of GBV in Fiji**. Annually, [around 64%](#) of women and 84% of LGBTQIA+ people in Fiji experience some form of violence or sexual abuse at the hands of an intimate partner. This is much higher than the global average. At the onset of the pandemic, [women's human rights organisations](#) in Fiji warned that COVID-19-imposed precautionary measures such as lockdowns, could lead to a heightened risk of gender-based violence as women are confined indoors with their abusers. School closures and loss of income also exacerbated these issues.

In Fiji we also saw a **reinforcement of gender stereotypes, such as the unpaid care work burden on women/young women** impacting multiple areas of their lives, including access to education. Women were also working longer hours as they are disproportionately represented in the health or essential services industries as compared to men. In some cases, this has not been accepted by partners and husbands who develop insecurities and are not happy with having to look after their children or carry out household duties they think a woman should be doing.

Finally, **some realities and narratives have been completely removed or ignored** during the pandemic. For example, sex workers in Fiji were being victimised alongside losing their incomes and not being able to provide for their families.

COVID-19 has exacerbated all of these pre-existing structural oppressions in Fiji, and the flow-on effects have impacted our grantee-partners in different ways. Below we share with you the major impacts of the pandemic on women's rights and feminist groups in Fiji as reported by our grantee-partners: increased gender-based violence; location-based impacts; economic and livelihood impacts; and impacts on access to information and services. All of these are interlinked, in that any one of these creates a ripple effect in another. For instance, livelihood impacts can affect GBV; or access to information and services can affect livelihoods, and so on.



1.2 Increased gender-based violence

With Fiji's extremely high rates of violence against women, girls and gender non-conforming people, a rise in violence has been one of the major COVID-19 impacts, with a recorded 606 per cent increase in calls to the national Domestic Violence helpline between February-April 2020, when the initial COVID-19 lockdowns occurred. The Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation reported that 54% of the calls related to family violence and the remainder were seeking information and assistance relating to COVID-19. In 2021, 5610 women reached out to the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC) in relation to domestic violence between January and October, of which over 3000 were received during the lockdown period. These statistics are stark - and for vulnerable communities such as rural and remote women and girls, the situation is compounded by intersecting issues such as isolation and lack of services, including access to the internet or a mobile phone.

Grantee partner, **Medical Services Pacific (MSP)**, provides sexual reproductive health and rights services, counselling, mobile clinical services and legal literacy support, with a maritime outreach program providing services for rural communities. They reported a 20% increase in cases during April - June, compared with the first quarter of 2021 (through their helpline, referrals from the Fiji Police and in-person reporting). They also provided psychosocial and legal support for 53 individuals - a 96% increase compared to the first quarter - and relocated a few women and families facing GBV to anonymous designated safe houses. MSP say that some women have no choice but to stay in an abusive relationship especially for the sake of their young children; and that in other situations women are working longer hours, taking on more responsibilities or needing to find food for their families, which has challenged patriarchal stereotypes of women's roles.

Building Innate Resilience Through Hearts (BIRTH Fiji), moved to working from home but continued to provide their services via phone thus keeping their clients and themselves safe. BIRTH Fiji observed that many women found it difficult to seek help due to the lack of privacy, safety, and ownership of a mobile phone within their homes.

In addition to an increase in GBV, some grantee partners have reported discrimination and abuse based on gender identity, sexual orientation, psycho-social and physical disabilities. For example, the **Pacific Rainbow Advocacy Network (PRAN)** reported that their LGBTQIA+ members have been facing additional discrimination, including verbal abuse, since the first case of COVID-19 was detected. PRAN's Coordinator said that abuse had been accepted as the norm in their community - they have been called names on the street and even blamed for bringing the virus into the country. There were also reports of police abuse of power against sex workers. PRAN is a community-led network in Lautoka comprising about 80 members with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, including homeless people, single mothers, people living with disabilities, and former and current sex workers. In a recent interview, PRAN drew attention to how sex workers and the LGBTQIA+ community in Fiji are hesitant to access public services, such as health, because of the violence, stigmatisation and discrimination levelled against them.



**606%
INCREASE**

in calls to the national Domestic Violence helpline between February-April 2020, when the initial COVID-19 lockdowns occurred.



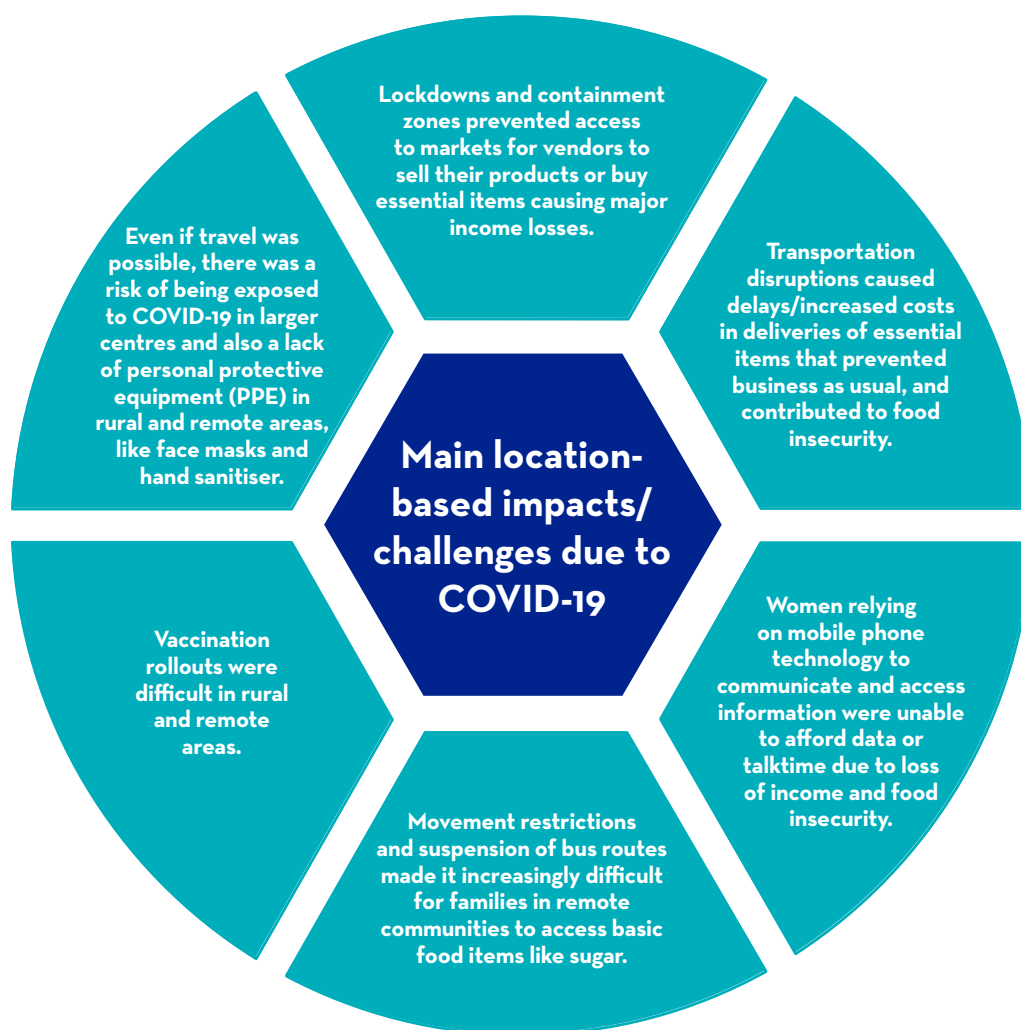
1.3 Location-based impacts:

Grantee partners in remote and rural locations initially reported being less affected by the COVID-19 pandemic than urban partners. Those in remote and rural locations were already required to be self-sufficient due to their geographic isolation. However, **40% of rural women in Fiji work as farmers or workers on farms in the informal economy, and 85% of market vendors in Fiji are women.** As forecast by the COVID-19 Response Gender Working Group: “Many informal workers depend on public spaces and movement for their livelihoods, including supply chain distribution and traveling to markets to sell or buy produce and/or inputs. Restrictions that reduce mobility impact vendors’ source of livelihoods and lead to increased business costs.”

During lockdowns and when containment zones were introduced, **rural and remote communities were impacted due to movement restrictions or being unable to access containment zones for income and essential services.** Grantee partner **Naitasiri Women in Dairy Group (NWDG)**, a usually thriving group of smallholder dairy farmer women, found themselves cut off from markets due to the containment zones and their support from the Ministry of Agriculture was significantly reduced. This caused a 50% drop in their main source of income. They resorted to planting cash

crops, cassava, and taro which they tried to sell at the border, but faced challenges such as costly transport, no market infrastructure or guaranteed sales, and no access to washrooms. When schools closed, women in the NWDG community shouldered the extra burden of being mothers, entrepreneurs, farmers, teachers, chefs, caregivers, and even veterinarians, birthing cows in the absence of support from the Ministry of Agriculture.

Rural and remote communities also faced **communication challenges**. As COVID-19 restricted gatherings and communications to online or via text messages and phone calls, this was an additional financial burden for families experiencing lost income and concerned about food security so many were unable to purchase data and talktime. In addition, with the loss of their 'solesolevaki' (shared workload and social equity) approach due to restricted gatherings, the NWDG also shifted their member's wellbeing checks to phone calls. This did not work for all members who said that they cannot speak freely as they are being listened to by household members.



1.4 Economic and livelihood impacts:

The impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods was immediately felt. With Fiji's thriving international tourism industry essentially shut down, the direct impacts and ripple effects left many women and gender non-conforming people unemployed and forced to find other ways to support themselves and their loved ones.

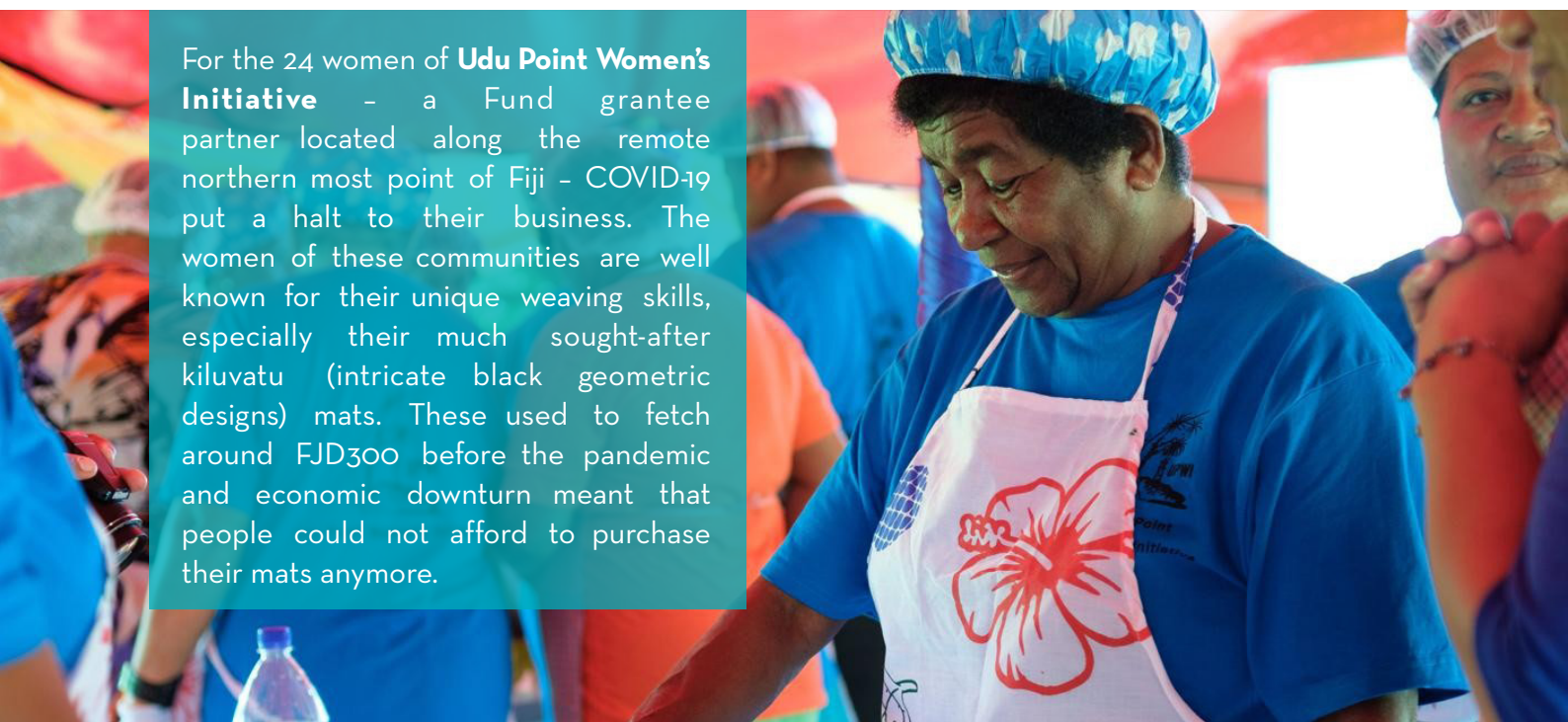


“Women comprise a third of the tourism workforce. Most tourism jobs are at minimum wage level, including cleaners, restaurant staff, and receptionists... Tourism [also] provides an important market for woman-owned micro and small enterprises, including eco-crafts, flowers for hotels, local artisanal food products, jewellery, handicraft, and organic cosmetics.”³

Other industries faced similar downturns, such as retail and transport, but some sectors were overwhelmed and overworked - such as the health and social services sectors dominated by women workers. Sex workers faced a dire situation with loss of income coupled with stigmatisation, abuse, and being left out of social protection measures. All of this was exacerbated by restrictions such as lockdowns, school closures and containment zones in both rural (impacts outlined above) and urban areas. Loss of or significantly reduced income meant that **food insecurity became the number one priority**. Communities and groups had to innovate and pivot to other ways of earning money to buy food, barter items, or grow their own food (see specific examples in Section 2).

PRAN reported that for sex workers, curfews meant they were no longer allowed to go outside at night to work. Members then started gathering in the city during the day to try to earn a living - and some were arrested. Sex workers struggled to earn an income in this situation and food insecurity became a problem as well. PRAN said their priority has been helping single mothers, older women and the homeless, but they continue to face abuse and stigma on top of just trying to survive. When the schools closed, members who were mothers found it particularly hard to juggle work while meeting their children’s needs as they stayed at home.

Grantee partner, the **Women Entrepreneurs and Business Council (WEBC)** has close to 80 members around Fiji ranging from micro enterprises to large businesses. In April 2020, WEBC surveyed its members and found that 75% had been adversely affected by the pandemic and TC Harold. The Council reported there have been many challenges since the onset of COVID-19 - mental health issues due to business closures, restrictions locking out some owners from their businesses, and increased anxiety and stress levels. On the other hand, WEBC reported that more members have joined compared with pre-covid (59 new members from all over Fiji). More women out of work went into business to support their families and more women wanted to access WEBC training to broaden their knowledge on business.



For the 24 women of **Udu Point Women’s Initiative** - a Fund grantee partner located along the remote northern most point of Fiji - COVID-19 put a halt to their business. The women of these communities are well known for their unique weaving skills, especially their much sought-after kiluvatu (intricate black geometric designs) mats. These used to fetch around FJD300 before the pandemic and economic downturn meant that people could not afford to purchase their mats anymore.

3

<http://www.fwrn.org.fj/images/Gender and COVID Guidance Note - Rapid Gender Analysis.pdf>

Main economic and livelihood impacts/challenges due to COVID-19:

Most immediately felt and then exacerbated by TC Harold.

The tourism industry took a massive hit, resulting in the closure of the majority of hotels in Fiji. Thousands of employees were given reduced hours and pay, while the remainder lost their jobs and sources of income.

Unemployment or reduced income in the informal sector meant that women were hardest hit as they are the majority of informal workers.

Increasing food insecurity; Essential items were limited by containment zones; people on the streets required more support; restricted movements and people not being able to work meant families could not afford to buy enough food.

Sex workers and the LGBTQIA+ community were impacted significantly and the intersecting oppressions they face such as social stigma and government erasure exacerbated their economic situation.

Communications shifting to internet and telephone, coupled with lost income meant that some people could not afford to pay for data or talktime anymore, and were missing out on critical information and connection.

Restricted movements and risk of contracting the virus also meant less capacity for traditional community/collective care, requiring innovation and new approaches.

1.5 Information and services impacts:

Almost every grantee partner reported COVID-19 impacting how they access and use information and services, from disruptions and changes to delivery modalities, to lack of access. Access to and affordability of personal protective equipment (PPE) such as face masks and hand sanitiser as well as information on how to properly use them was also reported a challenge for rural and remote communities and vulnerable groups.

PRAN members, for instance, reported at the beginning of the pandemic they had a hard time sharing accurate and timely information, especially with those who did not own mobile phones or could not afford to top up their phone credit to receive updates on social media: “When many of the restrictions were imposed suddenly by the government, my community members struggled to make sense of the information and instructions. We did not know why we had to practice social distancing, we did not know why we needed to wash our hands or even how to properly wear a mask. All this type of information is very important because it helps them better prepare themselves.” LGBTQIA+ PRAN members were also hesitant to access health services due to increased discrimination and stigma.





For the **NWDG**, access to accurate and timely information has also been a challenge. Seruwaia Kabukabu, a smallholder dairy farmer and Secretary of the group, said that in the initial weeks of the lockdown, she found it difficult to relay information and national announcements to her members who are spread across Naitasiri and usually communicate through Facebook, Viber, text and phonecalls. With members prioritising food over data and talktime, this information conduit was not always viable anymore. The lack of information, connectivity, religious beliefs, and misinformation were also key reasons why many in Naitasiri were reluctant to get vaccinated. NWDG took it upon themselves to foster greater understanding and encourage the community to get vaccinated (see Section 2).

For some, the shift from face-to-face communication and information provision to online platforms like Zoom created new challenges. The **Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM)**, for example, reported 'Zoom fatigue' from their leadership program's online sessions, and that sharing and absorbing each others' energy online can be draining. Other issues like online participant attendance becoming lower over time; and internet affordability or access to equipment were also issues. Members of the **Fiji Girit Council-Women's Wing** were forced to cancel their face-to-face workshops on issues such as health awareness and leadership due to COVID-19. They had to upskill and provide training on how to download and use online platforms such as Zoom, as well as navigate new problems such as connectivity and affordability of data.

Access to health services and information was a particular concern for women and gender non-conforming people and those in rural and remote communities. In addition to impacts on GBV services (discussed above in Section 1.2) mental health services and women's sexual and reproductive health and information provision can be interrupted in a crisis situation. **Psychiatric Survivors Association (PSA)** reported that with the difficulties of COVID-19 movement restrictions, some of their most remote members lacked access to important government announcements. PSA also had to provide daily meals to 50 of its members living on the streets as there was no foot traffic around to offer them food during the lockdowns. For **BIRTH Fiji**, whose core business is counselling, they found innovative ways to communicate support to women facing GBV, especially if they were in a dire situation. They experienced changes in modality: unable to provide face to face counselling, so they did some refresher training in phone counselling. However, they also experienced changes in service delivery: receiving requests for social work - accommodation, medication, rations, nappies, etc. They collaborated with other organisations to meet these types of requests. BIRTH Fiji also said they were inundated with requests for groceries from many informal communities in Lautoka and were able to distribute 260 food vouchers to families in need. Leveraging this opportunity, they disseminated information from the Fiji Women's Rights Movement on gender, GBV and referral agencies' contacts - connecting women to counsellors or encouraging women facing violence to reach out for help.

COVID-19 presented new challenges for those living with a disability, especially those relying on the support of a carer and the **Fiji Disabled Peoples Federation (FDPF)** reported that March - June 2020 had been especially hard on the Federation and its affiliates: Fiji Association for the Deaf, United Blind Persons of Fiji, Spinal Injuries Association, and PSA. As costs increased, national budget cuts in 2020 significantly impacted FDPF affiliates, reducing the majority of its operations. For the **Spinal Injury Association (SIA)**, 90% of their services were reduced and given that SIA is the only organisation in Fiji that provides mobility devices like wheelchairs, their services are crucial. FDPF and its affiliates all reported having to reduce the working hours of their 40 staff with some going without wages for almost two months.



Main information and services impacts/challenges due to COVID-19:

Misinformation, stigma, religious beliefs creating vaccine hesitancy, and lack of awareness of COVID-19 risks.

Access to information impacted by communication changes and challenges such as curtailed face to face meetings and gatherings.

Unaffordability of data and talktime due to food insecurity and other issues.

PPEs inaccessible and costly.

Hard to find or access information, especially for marginalised groups like people with disabilities and sex workers.

Lack of information tailored to rural communities - led to some vaccine hesitancy and misinformation.

Access to sexual and reproductive health services impacted.

National budget cuts and redirections resulted in a reduction of some critical services.

The shift to online delivery of information and services was a steep learning curve for some who have traditionally used face to face methods and does not take into account people who have no access to devices such as laptops and mobile phones.

Online communications and information provision is different and creates a different kind of weariness and burnout.



SECTION 2

THE RESPONSES



2.1 Grantee responses: adaptations and shifts

Partners have shared with us how the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have made them utilise their grants in different ways to adapt to the new context. From training workshops on how to run a business; working remotely and virtually; to finding ways of tackling food insecurity such as communal gardens - grantee partners have demonstrated resilience, innovation, and collaboration. WFF listened and adapted along the way to ensure funding could meet evolving grantee needs, including the introduction of our resilience grant.

EVAW responses:

MSP: As a recognised essential services provider with strong partnerships with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services and the Fiji Police Force, MSP operated 24/7 to ensure that GBV cases were prioritised and that people had the right support to flee their abusers. Like others, MSP has to learn to adapt to the new normal. Counsellors and officers attended online workshops and capacity building sessions and developed their online skills to use software such as Zoom. As restrictions have eased the sexual assault clients are opening up again, but they say that online learning and trainings will remain. Burnout of staff was an issue. MSP provided shift work for them to manage this and used their volunteer pool. Self-care was also a focus and did what they could to help each other: mental health walks; hairdressing activities, etc.

For **BIRTH Fiji**, networking with stakeholders and the community was vital to meet the changes in service delivery they were experiencing, such as requests for food. They identified quickly who they could work with, so that others could distribute needed items such as food rations. They also focused on teamwork: with some staff operating from the office and others at home, and they provided support to counsellors, like clinical supervisors, reminding them about their safe care management.

Geographic ‘workarounds’:

Social enterprise **Rise Beyond the Reef (RBTR)** worked with various Fijian Government agencies and civil society organisations to provide food rations and COVID-19 prevention kits to remote communities. During the lockdowns, RBTR transported essential food items to remote communities in trucks to minimise people’s need to travel and risk catching the virus, and to avoid costly transportation. Food rations were purchased with money RBTR had fundraised on Facebook, and they continued to fundraise to help subsidise the income of their partner communities due to the lack of prime market access for their crops. In addition, in early February RBTR partnered with the ANZ Bank Staff Foundation to start a Farm Food Bank aimed at supplying crop cuttings such as kumala (sweet potato), bele (local spinach), and other raised seedlings short term to promote and bolster food sovereignty for upper mountain remote partner communities. The project has been extended with communities now setting up communal spaces to raise seedlings and mass propagate a diverse range of root and vegetable crops.

When COVID-19 positive cases began to rise and the Fijian Government imposed containment zones that prevented some **MSP** health workers from coming to the clinic, instead of staying at home, nurse practitioner Amelia Nairabelevu Batitua offered her expertise to the Navua Hospital where she had been supporting the vaccination teams. Under this secondment, Amelia travelled to some of the most remote and hardest to reach places in the Namosi highlands and outer islands like Beqa to help vaccinate Fijians.





NWDG: When containment zones cut them off from accessing markets, NWDG collaborated with another grantee partner, Talanoa Treks, who met the NWDG at the Sawani border to collect their oyster mushrooms, sell them to buyers in Suva and deposit the money into the women's M-PAiSA accounts (mobile wallets).

Economic pivots/innovations:

For **RBTR** the shut down of the tourism industry meant RBTR and its partner communities lost its main income source. Innovating with products and creative marketing was key to RBTR's strategy to stay afloat where many small businesses were closing around Fiji. For example, with the shortage of protective equipment available in Fiji such as face masks, RBTR was one of the many small businesses that quickly adapted its product line to include face masks and hygiene products. In 2021, RBTR went further to establish the Basa Exchange - a response-recovery concept that promotes circular economies, inclusiveness of rural-remote women and the communities they come from. The Basa Exchange draws from traditional trading systems, where remote communities continue to live and grow traditional root crops and fruits which RBTR purchases at farmgate prices then supplies to food-insecure households in urban centres that have been severely affected by job losses and COVID-19 related isolation. This fresh produce has helped feed 2,494 households plus 549 individuals from Nadi to Ba, Nausori and Suva.

WEBC has been conducting free online and face-to-face workshops for women entrepreneurs and WEBC members wanting to venture into new forms of business. They also hosted a safety net programme to help members with stress and listen to their struggles. WEBC hosted a panel discussion in June 2021 to create awareness on the Protocols for COVID-Safe Business Operations, which have been problematic for the majority of businesses in Nadi, Lautoka, Suva, and Nausori. With many women's businesses remaining closed, struggling to meet the Protocols, WEBC stepped in to provide practical advice on how to apply and the legal ramifications of non-compliance.

Udu Point Women's Initiative resolved to address their livelihoods challenges by identifying alternative income-generating sources and how the members could work together to access new markets and opportunities. They changed their product line to offer smaller and more affordable handicrafts such as smaller-sized mats, baskets, and earrings, which are earning around FJD 50 - 250 per month. The women also used Facebook to reach out to friends and family to market their handicrafts. To reduce travel costs, the initiative elects two members to make the journey to Labasa once a month to sell their handicrafts and they take turns at leadership roles. The women have also undertaken training in grant management, financial literacy, monitoring and evaluation, child protection, gender equality and social inclusion. The flow-on effects of their business changes and trainings have resulted in a savings club, income diversification and more confidence to contribute their views at village and tikina meetings. They also reported that men in their villages are now helping them with their work.

PRAN worked on initiatives to help its vulnerable members receive relief supplies, pivot to alternative forms of livelihood and access healthcare services in a safe space. After completing a needs assessment, PRAN provided tailored relief packages for members who needed help, including those who are homeless, single mothers or living with disabilities. PRAN also worked with the Police to address the problem of homelessness of their members. The network has helped its members plant vegetables such as eggplant, cabbage, and okra in their backyards to build food security. They identified land plots in Ba, Lautoka, and Nadi to plant income-generating crops such as yaqona and cassava. This will help provide a sustainable livelihood alternative for the members.





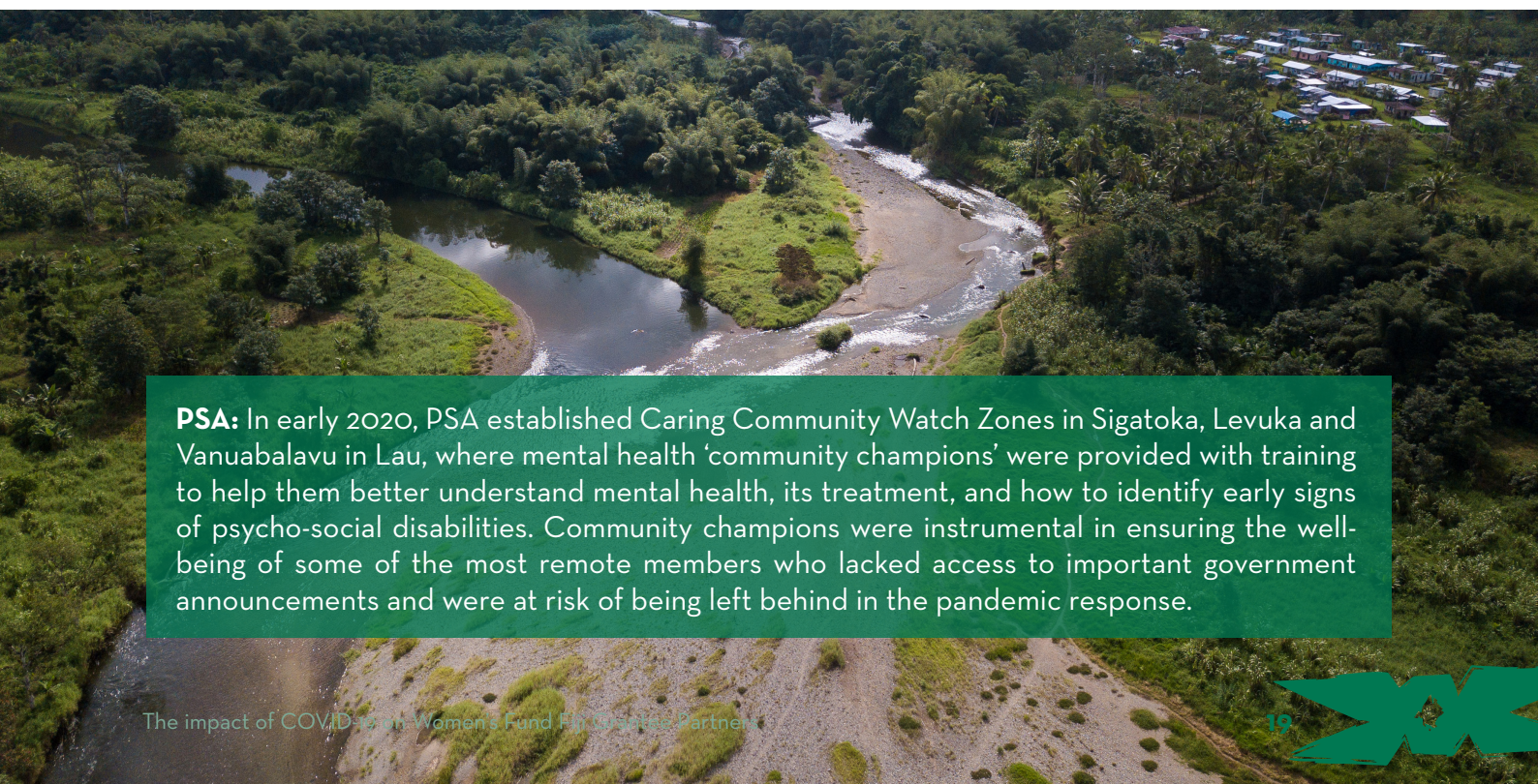
Provision of information/services:

NWDG: When NWDG members could not afford to use their phones to communicate anymore due to lost income, the Secretary, Seruwaia, used handwritten notes, transported via the milk collector, to deliver her messages to her isolated community members. On some occasions, there was no choice but to purchase talktime to call her members and if there were network issues, she would make a trip to their farms, standing safely at a distance to relay messages and government announcements. Acknowledging the farmers' and communities' loss of income, remoteness, and long commutes to health care facilities, Seruwaia also coordinated a vaccination drive for her members and their families with the Ministry of Health. She offered her own home as the vaccination location and even housed and fed MoH officials who made the trip to Naitasiri: "We tried to encourage all members of the community to get vaccinated by talking about the benefits of the vaccine. Prevention from getting severely sick, protection for their families and most importantly so that our lives can return to normal."

For the **Fiji Gimit Council-Women's Wing**, cancelled workshops turned into an avenue to help those in need. The group pivoted to virtual workshops and helped their members navigate this new delivery, and they then used the rest of their unspent grant to purchase 30 grocery packs for underprivileged families.

Lanieta Tuimabu, Office Manager of the **Fiji Disabled Peoples Federation**, described the Federation's efforts to ensure people with disabilities were not left without information: "When we had the first cases, one critical discussion was about access to information and making sure that people with disabilities were able to receive COVID-19 messaging to better prepare themselves." As funding cuts led to a reduction in services the FDPF turned to partnership and collaboration to continue their critical work and to further support their communities. They were able to distribute 102 food rations, 11 farming kits containing tools and seedlings, 70 dignity & hygiene packs, and 60 mixed kits containing food rations, hygiene products, and seedlings. Going forward their long-term goal is to focus on self-sustaining activities like farming and the provision of seedlings.

PRAN: The group worked with Medical Services Pacific to help its members access sexual, reproductive and general health services in a safe space. For some members, this was the first time they received a general health check-up.



PSA: In early 2020, PSA established Caring Community Watch Zones in Sigatoka, Levuka and Vanuabalavu in Lau, where mental health 'community champions' were provided with training to help them better understand mental health, its treatment, and how to identify early signs of psycho-social disabilities. Community champions were instrumental in ensuring the well-being of some of the most remote members who lacked access to important government announcements and were at risk of being left behind in the pandemic response.



2.2 Collective and movement responses

Intersecting issues require intersecting approaches that can only happen through solidarity and collaboration, and this is what women's rights and feminist movements do best. Overall, grantee partners have highlighted how collaboration in the COVID-19 context was the engine room of their survival and how different groups stepped up and leaned in to fill service gaps, learn new skills, and ensure no-one was left behind. This was particularly important for vulnerable groups whose realities were swept under the carpet, such as sex workers.

Members of the Fiji Civil Society Organisation (CSO) Alliance for COVID-19 Humanitarian Response, which was established in early April 2020 by eight CSOs, reflected recently of their work on interlinking issues of community development, human rights, social justice, gender justice, and violence against women. They detailed how collaboration in this context of intersecting crises is a crucial strategy for feminist and women leaders and movements in mobilising community responses and using collective voices to influence national policy. From partnerships between grantees and CSO collaborations to funders reflecting and learning together - collective responses to COVID-19 that build and sustain our movements have not only been a way to stay afloat, but a way to strengthen our movements and advocacy.





Grantee partner collaborations:

Our grantee partners have shone the spotlight on the Fijian practice of “Solesolevaki”, working together and supporting each other and really demonstrating how women’s rights and feminist movements use autonomous resourcing and sustainability practices to help each other.

PRAN adopted a holistic approach partnering with RBTR to source fresh produce which they have also paired with store-bought basic food items and PPE for their members and communities: “The exchange was a success on many levels, our members in Nadi and Ba were assisted with food ration including fresh crops and vegetables from youth and female farmers of Vaturu. This initiative benefited our marginalised community with a healthy diet and it also provides that income to Youths of Natawa village and the women of Vaturu who are underprivileged, and remote communities that have limited access to assistance in these trying times of our lives.” Bonita Qio - PRAN Coordinator.

Talanoa Treks has partnered with the Foundation for Rural Integration Enterprises Foundation (FRIEND Fiji) to support women-led farms in the Ra Province and to supply fresh produce in the food ration packs that are being distributed by FRIEND Fiji in the Western Division. Talanoa Treks also supported **NWDG** by providing markets for their oyster mushrooms and the provision of PPE.

Udu Point Women’s Initiative members travelled to Viti Levu on a **peer-learning exchange with other women’s groups**. They learned about the solesolevaki approach and oyster mushroom farming from the NWDG, starting and managing microenterprises from the women of Namuka Nakelo (a South Pacific Business Development microfinance grouping), organic farming techniques from Eileen Chute who runs the Bulaccino Farm in Nadi and a two-day visit to the Pilgram Farm in Nadi where they learned soap making, floral arrangement, virgin coconut oil production techniques, and the importance of self-care and wellness.

MSP and BIRTH Fiji have been providing critical medical and psycho-social support to pregnant women. Many pregnant women remain unvaccinated and are anxious about the safe delivery of their babies, both organisations are supporting the Ministry of Health through maternity clinics and counselling.

Pacific Centre for Peace Building (PCP) has been providing COVID relief support for frontline workers and community leaders in informal settlements. Building on their existing partnership with the Fiji Police Department, PCP is also conducting surveys on the impact their work during this crisis are having on their families, documenting experiences from communities and determining if psycho-social support is needed post-COVID-19. PCP has also partnered with **FRIEND Fiji** and the **Sosoqosoqo Vakamarama i-Taukei** to collectively set up the COVID-19 women’s facility at the Sosoqosoqo Vakamarama i-Taukei complex in Nabua. The facility houses female COVID-19 positive patients and provides them with support and medical treatment. PCP provides daily meals for patients and frontline workers at the facility.

Fiji Cancer Society (FCS) - The FCS is supporting cancer patients to respond to added human security needs including PPEs and other health needs of patients in this health crisis and their added vulnerable state. FCS is also supporting **MSP** and the Ministry of Health with home deliveries of medicines. FCS also teamed up with the **Fiji Girit Council-Women’s Wing** to offer virtual awareness on cancer screening. BIRTH Fiji is also providing counselling support and referrals to cancer patients.



CSO collaborations:

The [Fiji CSO Alliance for COVID-19 Humanitarian Response](#) formed in early 2020 by [feminist organisations](#) in Fiji witnessing the “intertwining women’s rights issues seen on the ground, and concerns on the shortage of food supplies, medication and other essential needs.” The alliance builds on existing partnerships and allies to coordinate COVID-19 response efforts, information, and analysis. Hosted by the FWRM, other members include the Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises & Development (FRIEND), Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre (FWCC), Citizen’s Constitutional Forum (CCF), Social Empowerment and Education Programme (SEEP), femLINKpacific, and the Rainbow Pride Foundation (RPF). In August 2020, DIVA for Equality Fiji transitioned out of the Alliance to focus on its ongoing relief and humanitarian work. The CSO alliance has worked together over 2020/21 to disseminate information, help with relief efforts, fundraise, and run donation drives and lobby the government to work more closely with communities.

The COVID-19 Response Gender Working group was also formed in early 2020. The working group comprised: Diverse Voices and Action (DIVA) for Equality Fiji; FWRM; UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office (MCO), the Asian Development Bank, and the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation (MWCPA). They moved quickly to analyse the emerging crisis and co-develop a guidance note that was shared with the Fiji government on ‘[Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 on Women in Fiji](#),’ which outlined the context that COVID-19 was entering, and made recommendations to mitigate the issues.

These collaborations set about to ensure that firstly, immediate needs were met for those in need, and secondly, that government responses were inclusive and appropriate - highlighting gaps, making recommendations based on communities’ realities, and holding the government accountable. In many ways, civil society always steps up to meet a crisis, but vulnerable groups can slip through the cracks, or be simply ignored by response efforts due to political inaction, discriminatory religious or cultural beliefs, and systemic oppressions such as those outlined earlier in this report (see Section 1.1). Feminist groups and those already grounded in marginalised communities such as our grantee partners, ensure that no voice goes unheard and that power imbalances are confronted.

Other responses and collaborations:

Prospera Asia and the Pacific is the regional chapter of the Prospera International Network of Women’s Funds. It is made up of eight women’s funds namely the Women’s Fund Fiji (the Fund), HER Fund, Korea Foundation for Women, Mongolian Women’s Fund, South Asia Women Foundation India, TEWA, Women’s Fund Asia, and the Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights, Asia & the Pacific. To leverage each other’s experiences as feminist and women’s rights funders during the COVID-19 pandemic, we convened a learning circle to collaborate, share learnings, and talk through the challenges. This network has really helped us consolidate and validate our experiences working with partners in Fiji and we found that while we have our own, unique learnings (shared below), many of the funder reflections from the learning circle were similar.

How the Fund responded - and some key learnings:

The core principles of feminist resource mobilisation and funding - trusting grantees and letting them lead - are what we and other feminist funders have drawn upon during the pandemic. Like a bottomless well, feminism is protective and self-sustaining in this way, all the while being transformative and revolutionary and reaching for what is just.



Given the constantly evolving situation and the increasing requests we received for support, one of our biggest learnings was that we needed to adjust our granting mechanism. So the Fund opened a Resilience Grant Call in May 2021. The grant was made available to our current 38 grantee partners to provide immediate relief assistance. Between May and June, the Fund committed FJ \$267,000 in grants to nine groups and organisations, funding 10 initiatives focused on COVID-19 response and recovery. Our grantee partners are groups and organisations on the ground and at the forefront of humanitarian work. They know best the realities of their communities and how to effectively address the increasing socio, economic and psycho-social needs and challenges of their beneficiaries. We are extremely proud to see the magnitude of work that all our grantee partners have done and their ability and willingness to quickly reprogramme to the current context.

Our greatest strength has been listening and our ability to virtually convene as a group to discuss and share challenges, best practices, and pathways forward. These convenings have instigated partnerships and support between grantee partners like the ones outlined above.



**FJD267,000
WAS COMMITTED**
in grants to nine groups
and organisations, funding
10 initiatives focused on
COVID-19



Key learnings from the Prospera Asia and Pacific chapter learning circle:

As part of the eight women's funds of the Prospera Asia and the Pacific regional chapter, we participated in learning circles that had a central focus on the key role of women's funds, which is to mobilise and distribute resources to feminist, and women's rights movements. Below is a brief on our learnings in relation to mobilising resources and grant management during a pandemic. A more detailed outline can be found in the report here: <https://www.prospera-inwf.org/#!/-summary-report-covid-19/>

Resource mobilisation:

◆ **Supporting a feminist resource mobilisation agenda during and beyond COVID-19**

Resource mobilisation⁴ is one of the cornerstones of women's funds in providing critical and much-needed support that is responsive to women, girls, and trans* rights. Women's funds are often under-resourced and work creatively and strategically with limited resources.

Mobilising resources in a COVID-19 heavy context meant working creatively, flexibly, and with clear intent to ensure support reached those in most need. We used their limited resources effectively, employing multiple strategies that were grounded in deep listening and consultation with our grantee partners. This enabled us to quickly understand what support was needed, and how to ensure this support was holistic and reached those most impacted by the pandemic.

The experience of mobilising resources during the COVID-19 pandemic has affirmed what women's funds have long been advocating for- a feminist resource mobilisation agenda that is responsive to women and trans* rights, informed by the diverse and inter-connected needs of groups, and built on meaningful engagement with funding partners. Women's funds can play an important role to bridge this funding and resource distribution agenda.


◆ **Placing people at the centre of resource mobilisation: flexible, and emergency-informed fundraising⁵.**

A fundamental principle that guides the work of women's funds is an intentional commitment to and focus on supporting women, trans* groups and human rights defenders who are marginalised. During COVID-19 this guiding principle became even more relevant to how women's funds mobilised support as the impact of the pandemic was felt more acutely by the groups women's funds work with. These groups faced existing personal, political, and digital security vulnerabilities and COVID-19 intensified these existing vulnerabilities, particularly in relation to safety, food, and health security. The pandemic also gave rise to new crises such as economic insecurity. Women's funds placed people, and their diverse and multifaceted needs and priorities at the centre of their resource mobilisation processes and response, ensuring resources they raised was responsive to meet both the practical and strategic needs of diverse groups.

Women's funds reflected how grantees were further marginalised from national government humanitarian assistance and COVID-19 response. The Fiji Disabled People's Federation was left with a significant funding gap as a result of their grant from government being reduced by almost 50%. Their grant funding was diverted to support Fiji's supplementary COVID-19 response budget. The Fund worked quickly and was able to secure a grant for the organisation

4 <https://www.prospera-inwf.org/#!/-summary-report-covid-19/>

5 Ibid.



that was at risk of shutting down, resulting in 40 people losing employment, and affecting the disability sector as a whole. With government responses failing to prioritise and meet the needs of people, particularly those that are marginalised, the work of women's funds is more critical than ever.

Grant management:

◆ **Making structural adjustments to grant-making practices and providing flexible grants**

By listening to our grantee partners, we were able to provide flexible and targeted grants. Structural adjustments to grant making practices included:

- » In the first instance, we looked internally to assess and re-program budgets and resources to support the increasing need on the ground. Funds were reallocated from budget lines such as travel and program meetings to initial emergency response;
- » Providing extensions to grants for existing grantee partners;
- » Supporting women's groups to change their interventions focusing on COVID-19 activities of grants disbursed before the pandemic;
- » Introduced resilience and movement building grants;
- » Continuing our support for movement building and support for grassroots movements by connecting grantee partners, governance and UN agencies, civil society groups and private sector

◆ **Addressing how different forms of discrimination intersect with and amplify gender-based discrimination**

As we continued to keep in touch with our grantee partners, the data, information, and stories that we gathered became the basis of our targeted grants. We supported operations costs of grantee partners and at the same time enabled partners to carry our direct relief work and essential services such as counselling. During this period, we played an instrumental role in supporting the key operational and human resources costs of a national disabled people's organisation who had a budget gap due to changes in government budgetary allocation.

◆ **Awareness raising and disseminating life-saving information.**

As the days became months with the outbreak of the pandemic, a key issue that emerged from our grantee partners was that there were groups of people that could not access nor understand the information about the pandemic, including how to protect themselves and others, alongside the nationwide restrictions and the impact that had on their work, families, and communities. At the Women's Fund Fiji, a key role that we played was ensuring that our staff and grantee partners had access to timely and accurate information about the pandemic. This was greatly done through the use of regular phone calls with online meetings and sharing of government issued information on our social media platforms. In most cases, nearly all of our grantee partners played a role in information dissemination including translating information into vernacular before government began to do so.





WFF COMMITTED
FJD267,000

IN GRANTS TO 9 GROUPS AND ORGANISATIONS, FUNDING 10 INITIATIVES FOCUSED ON COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

FDPF DISTRIBUTED

102 FOOD RATIONS

70 DIGNITY AND HYGIENE PACKS

60 MIXED KITS CONTAINING FOOD RATIONS, DIGNITY AND HYGIENE PACKS



MSP OPERATED

24/7

TO PRIORITISE GENDER BASED VIOLENCE CASES



MSP REPORTED A

96%

INCREASE

IN PSYCHOSOCIAL AND LEGAL SUPPORT CASES



FIJI GIRMIT COUNCIL-
WOMEN'S WING
DISTRIBUTED
30 GROCERY PACKS
TO UNDERPRIVILEGED
FAMILIES

PRAN AND FDPF
DISTRIBUTED SEEDLINGS
AND FARMING TOOLS TO
ASSIST MEMBERS



2,494
HOUSEHOLDS PLUS
549
INDIVIDUALS WERE ASSISTED VIA
RBTR'S BASA EXCHANGE

75%
WEBC MEMBERS
IMPACTED BY COVID-19
AND TC HAROLD





WOMEN'S
FUND
FIJI