



Impact of Rise Beyond the Reef in Rural Fiji: An Assessment

Conducted by: Dr. Aliti Vunisea with support from Dr. Farida Fleming

Thank you to our supporters



Rise Beyond the Reef (RBTR) was founded in 2013 to address the unique development needs of Fiji's remote rural communities. The program's primary goal is to improve women's lives through ecologically sustainable income-generating projects that use traditional skills and materials. These projects address gender inequities and create alternative platforms through which women can improve their own lives, along with the lives of their families and communities.

A core component of RBTR's initiatives is the Traditional Contemporary Arts and Crafts Income-Generating Program, which provides women with alternative income. Through this project, RBTR provides skills and leadership training, helps source raw materials, and builds links to markets. This project has successfully helped remove barriers to women's empowerment and economic development. For the past four years, RBTR has built networks at the village level through community-based interventions, met and consulted with community-based groups and leaders, and developed links between traditional, regional, and national government structures. Other RBTR projects include reintroducing more sustainable traditional crops, introducing local farmers to vanilla production and flower horticulture, generating charcoal from salvaged wood, and providing emergency assistance and support in communities impacted by recent natural disasters such as 2016's devastating Cyclone Winston.



In April of this year, RBTR completed an impact assessment of our work in Fiji's rural remote communities, and particularly how that work has affected and improved women's lives. The assessment was conducted over two weeks in 10 communities in Ba and Ra Provinces. Completing this assessment was facilitated by the fact that we began our work in Fiji in 2013 with household-level baseline studies, designed to assess local needs from a grass-roots perspective and help guide project goals. Thus, we were able to make both qualitative and quantitative comparisons to determine the impact of RBTR's ongoing work.

RBTR's primary goal, and particularly the goal of the Traditional Contemporary Arts and Crafts Income-Generating Program, is to improve women's and children's lives through ecologically sustainable income-generating projects using traditional skills and materials. The aim is to address gender inequalities, build women leaders, empower women economically, and address domestic violence against women and girls. The focus has been on reestablishing traditional Fijian crafts and crops, and making connections to world markets to foster income and financial objectives.

While the overarching goal of the project is to address gender inequalities through women's economic empowerment, the goals of the impact study are as follows:

- To identify household gender roles and assess how much household responsibilities are shared.
- To measure economic, personal, and reproductive health decision-making.
- To verify occurrences of gender-based violence, and to assess the quality of women's and girls' safety and protection.
- To analyze participation in village committees and meetings (Bose vaKoro or village meetings, and Bose ni Vanua, traditional leaders' community meeting), in religious and educational institutions, and at district and province levels.
- To ascertain changes in gender-based decision-making in the mataqali (clan) and in other community cultural spaces, and to document women's widening spheres of influence in the soqosoqo (women's tribal council).



Development projects like this can affect three levels (individual, household, and community) and may have both direct and indirect impacts on women's economic empowerment. At the individual level, we find that 80% of women in the RBTR project communities participate in the handicraft projects. Women bring their existing skills, and in the process learn new skills and gain knowledge in new areas, such as marketing, meeting deadlines, and assessing supply and demand. The new skills and knowledge, along with increased earnings, build women's confidence. In RBTR

projects, 95% of women participating gained more control over household resources. Greater economic independence allows these women to purchase items for themselves, to invest in their children's educations, and to invest or save their money. And when women are able to invest in their children's educations, future generations of women are empowered because more girls are able to attend school today.

At the household level, women who gain economic empowerment by participating in handicraft projects have more say in how household purchases are made, and major household decisions and expenses may be shared. For example, one woman in Yaloku says she and her husband are now sharing the building costs for a home extension. Furthermore, household wealth improves overall, resulting in better social and economic lives. A surprising development is that men, children, and other relatives—including the elderly—are helping out with tasks that are traditionally women's and girls' work, the result of women's increased workload due to handicraft project participation and income. Some men are even doing domestic chores.

Another indirect impact of greater economic empowerment is a possible decline in gender-based violence. In the original baseline study, 34% of women in the Yakete district in Ba reported that they had experienced some form of physical abuse. Although hard data on gender-based violence are notoriously difficult to acquire, 98% of our respondents report more amicable husband-wife relationships since starting the RBTR program. While gender-based violence was mentioned by respondents during the original baseline study, there was no mention of this issue during the impact assessment—arguably an indication that gender-based violence may have declined. Furthermore, 98% also agreed that violence of any form was not acceptable and should not be tolerated.

There have also been impacts at the community level. Women now participate to a greater extent in community meetings and have more of a voice in community level decisions. Women are making themselves heard at district meeting and have more engagement with women outside their own communities. Women are also engaging more amicably with other women. Finally, there is greater awareness about, and care of, the environment resulting in part from using locally sourced materials for handicraft production. Nearly all respondents (98%) say they are more careful how they use resources.



It is no coincidence that women’s representation and direct participation have increased in traditional, community, and district-level meetings since RBTR began its work in remote rural Fiji. CARE’s (2018) Gender Equality and Women’s Voice Framework states that programs successfully promoting gender equality must address agency, relations, and structures. Programs that improve gender equality address women’s individual agency (her power to act), social relations (community, family, kinship), and social and political structures. The optimal outcome is for a development program focusing on women to function at all three levels. This outcome is evident in the impact assessment of RBTR’s programs.

For example, women are represented in the Soqosoqo Vaka Marama, which are the traditional village women’s groups. Representatives from the soqosoqo would then attend the local committees. We noted above that women now have better relationships and communication with other women, something that would manifest itself at the Soqosoqo Vaka Marama level. In addition, although the proportion of women representatives at village committees has not increased, the women who do attend are participating more actively, and women coordinators from RBTR are present. As such, women have increased their spheres of influence and have more agency and presence where previously they had little or none. Women are speaking up in a culture where they are limited in actively participating in community meetings.

In addition to expanding their spheres of influence in the community, women who have gained empowerment through RBTR projects also have greater impact in their kinship networks. Households often consist of large extended family networks where age and gender usually determine who makes the decisions. However, when women have income to contribute to the household, there is more shared decision-making among household members, and therefore more discussion. Thus, when we look back at CARE's (2018) framework, it is evident that RBTR's projects have impacts at all three levels: individual agency, social relations, and traditional social structures.



The impact assessment also resulted in some recommendations for future work. These focus on relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. For example, plans for efficiency include clarifying quality control standards for both women and village coordinators. Plans to increase effectiveness include training more trainers. Plans for sustainability might mean strengthening the self-sustaining aspects of the projects and including communities in long-term plans for expansion. Lastly, to continue to explore and develop RBTR's programming with its partner communities to directly address norms of violence and women's formalized leadership roles at a community level.

RBTR's impact on women's empowerment in these rural remote Fijian communities has been significant. We close with a quote from CARE' (2014) 2020 Program Strategy:

At its root, poverty is caused by unequal power relations that result in the inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities between women and men, between powerholders and marginalised communities, and between countries. CARE believes that poverty cannot be overcome without addressing those underlying power imbalances.

References

CARE. (2014). *Working for poverty reduction and social justice. The CARE 2020 program strategy.*
https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_2020_Program_Strategy-English.pdf

CARE. (February 2018). *Gender equality and women's voice: Guidance note.*
https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/Gender_equality_womens_voice_Guidance_Note_2018.pdf