



# WOMEN AT WORK

A comparative analysis of the absorption and retention  
of women in Fiji's workforce

Market Development Facility | 2020



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understanding the nuances of the business case in relation to the absorption, retention and increasing agency of women in formal employment explored by the case studies featured in this paper.

Sadly, MDF was informed that since the time of the interview, Savaira Tukana passed away. MDF expresses its condolences to her family and friends during this difficult time.



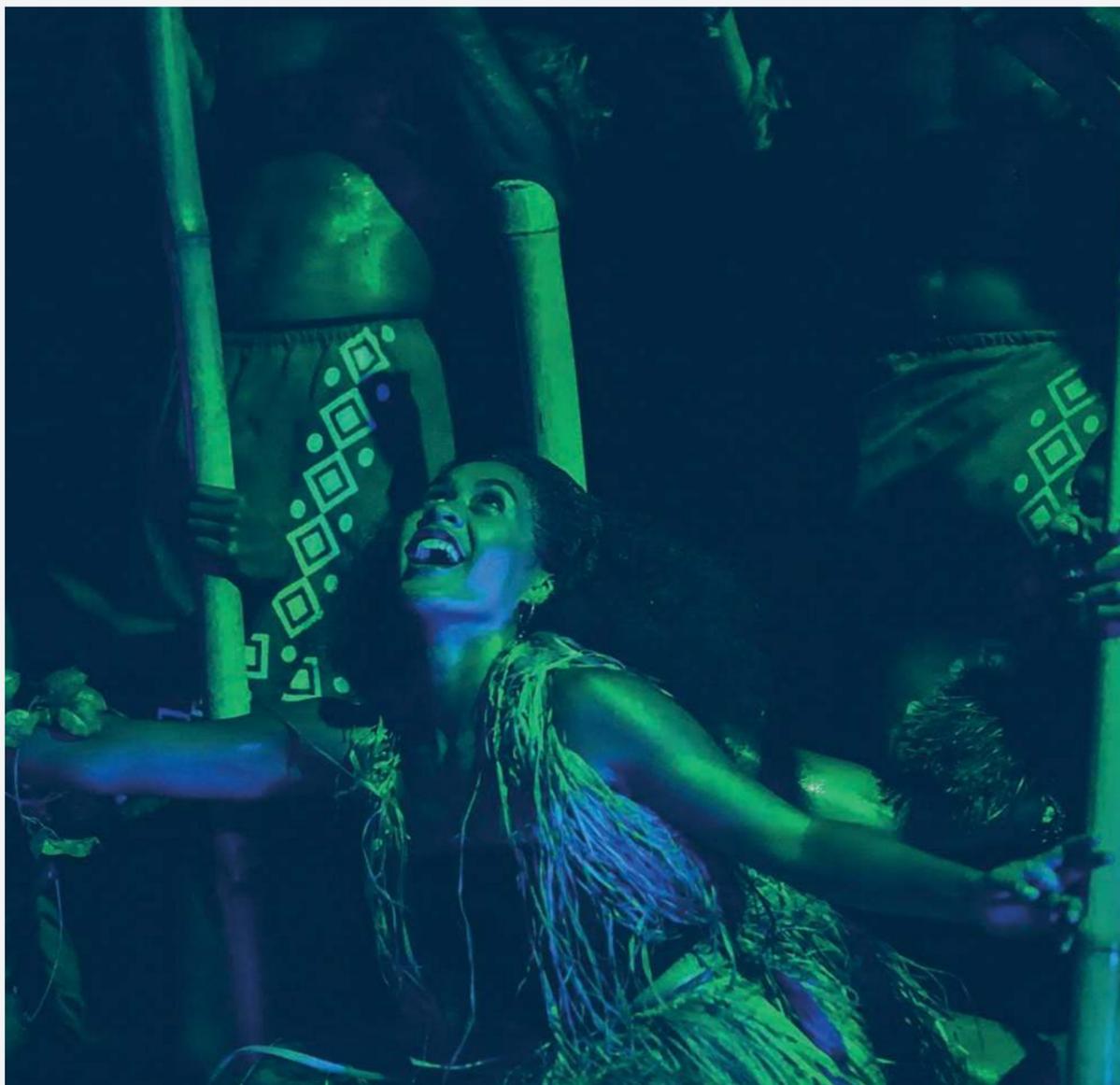
## About MDF

Market Development Facility (MDF) is an Australian Government-funded multi-country initiative that promotes sustainable economic development through higher incomes for women and men in partner countries.

MDF connects individuals, businesses, governments and nongovernmental organisations with each other and with markets, both at home and abroad, to enhance investment and coordination and allow partnerships to flourish, strengthening inclusive economic growth.

MDF is funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and implemented by Palladium in partnership with Swisscontact.

Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) is central to MDF's work. In the international development space, it is recognised as a successful outcome of economic programming.



## Purpose of this Report

In Fiji, there are more unemployed women than men; women also tend to participate less in entrepreneurial activities and manage fewer businesses. While the number of women in the economy is increasing,<sup>1</sup> mainly in the tourism sector, the traditional perceptions of gender roles, careers and responsibilities have remained unchanged. These perceptions limit women's opportunities in the labour market to positions that fit traditional gender occupations, such as housekeeping and care jobs. The lack of additional career pathways and assistance with household duties often results in women reducing their working hours, becoming inactive in the labour market or finding it difficult to achieve a work-home balance. Global research has shown that a higher percentage of women in the workforce directly links to an increase in gross domestic product (GDP) per capita.<sup>2</sup>

This paper presents three case studies that highlight how MDF Fiji seeks to empower women through a comparative analysis of the absorption and retention of women in the workforce in Fiji. It also investigates how an increased number of women in the workforce impacts the seven dimensions of WEE.<sup>3</sup>

The case studies focus on interventions where MDF assisted companies in putting policies and practices in place to benefit women who play a notable role in the economic activity of the household. This analysis aims to understand how these benefits affect women and impact household income.

The case studies provide a further argument for programs that aim to increase the number of women in the private sector through development initiatives. They also explore how the increased participation of women in the workforce impacts female agency, predominantly concerning decision-making power and well-being.

This analysis is based on in-depth interviews with businesses and beneficiaries, as well as MDF's institutional knowledge from Business Advisers regarding industries, business operations and the types of workforces in various sectors. MDF's robust results measurement policy and measurement exercises completed for these interventions over the past two years support the results of this paper.

These case studies intend to inform development practitioners, implementers, programs and any individuals interested in understanding the challenges of and possible solutions to increasing the involvement of women in Fiji's workforce.

MDF encourages interested parties to provide feedback and further ideas to promote discussion on this theme.

1 Prasad B. C., Chen H. and Singh B. (2013). An Analysis of Employment Prospects in Fiji's Urban Area. The Journal of Pacific Studies, Volume 33, Issue 2. Obtained from: [www.repository.usp.ac.fj/7648/1/An\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Employment\\_prospects\\_in\\_Fiji's\\_Urban\\_Area.pdf](http://www.repository.usp.ac.fj/7648/1/An_Analysis_of_Employment_prospects_in_Fiji's_Urban_Area.pdf).

2 The White House (2019). Relationship Between Female Labour Force Participation and GDP. Obtained from: [www.whitehouse.gov/articles/relationship-female-labor-force-participation-rates-gdp/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/relationship-female-labor-force-participation-rates-gdp/).

3 Market Development Facility (2018). Beyond Income: A Critical Analysis of Agency Measurement in Economic Programming. Obtained from: [www.marketdevelopmentfacility.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Beyond-Income-FINAL.pdf](http://www.marketdevelopmentfacility.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Beyond-Income-FINAL.pdf).

## Methodology

The information used in the development of this paper includes a mix of historical data gathered by MDF Fiji over the years, during intervention implementation and management, as well as thorough, in-depth interviews with businesses and beneficiaries conducted during the last quarter of 2019. The three case studies presented highlight the most significant changes achieved during 2019.

A key aim of this paper is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the qualitative changes and benefits experienced by women through higher engagement and retention in the private sector. To achieve this goal, rather than performing extensive sampling, the team conducted 25 in-depth interviews to collect information across the three interventions.

To measure the impact of the changes, MDF used an existing conceptual framework on measuring agency in economic programming<sup>3</sup> and analysed qualitative and quantitative data to identify the dimensions and changes in access and agency.

### Women's Economic Empowerment: Agency and Access

**Access** in WEE is typically defined as a woman's ability to access opportunities, information, networks or other goods and services.

**Agency** in WEE is typically defined as a woman's power to make and act on economic decisions.

**Figure 1: MDF WEE Measurement Radar Diagram Concept**

MDF examines seven dimensions to evaluate how program implementation impacts women's economic empowerment.



**Note:** Outward movement denotes positive change

Initial stage

Change in State

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Over the last ten years, Fiji has undergone a significant social and demographic change. The rural-urban shift has become more prominent, with 56 per cent of Fiji's population now residing in urban areas (compared to 51 per cent in 2007) and unemployment at its lowest rate in 20 years, at 4.5 per cent.<sup>4</sup> The average unemployment rate is higher for women than men: at 8 per cent and 3 per cent, respectively.<sup>5</sup> The number of women in business is also comparatively lower, with only 19 per cent of registered businesses listed to women and most being micro or small.<sup>6</sup> Gender-based segregation is still pronounced, with large numbers of women employed in low-income jobs in agriculture, handicrafts, garments, retail and tourism. The number of inactive women in the market is 193,959, compared to 74,351 men.

The private sector is currently leading economic growth in Fiji. The increased inclusion of women in the workforce can further boost the growth of the Fijian economy by offering new perspectives, exposing biases and meeting consumer needs. However, the participation of women in the workforce is dependent on several factors, such as education levels, social norms, type of job and access to childcare. In addition to creating employment opportunities, MDF found it crucial to develop different business cases for hiring and retaining women in small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

SMEs in Fiji generally lack dedicated human resources policies and processes that encourage staff absorption and retention. Instead, they primarily focus on keeping the

business financially stable. However, SMEs have small, tight-knit workplaces where the staff and management collaborate and understand each other. While there are few formal support services for women, these businesses undertake several small-scale practices to support women in the workplace, such as providing upskilling and career development opportunities. There are also a number of formal, informal and secondary support systems that SMEs rely on, such as childcare provision, community approvals and sharing of household responsibilities.

Over the last few years, MDF has supported businesses in putting policies into practice, such as offering dedicated childcare services on the premises and reassessing the companies' hiring policies to attract more women. During this time, MDF has identified practices that SMEs can easily incorporate to both benefit the business and help female employees to succeed. The three case studies selected for this paper present examples of companies that have brought about significant shifts in the market through such practices. The intention of this report is to inspire other practitioners and companies to adopt these initiatives or adapt their own practices and policies to ensure that more women enter and remain in the workforce.

<sup>4</sup> Fiji Bureau of Statistics (2018). 2017 Population and Housing Census. Obtained from [www.statsfiji.gov.fj/index.php/census-2017](http://www.statsfiji.gov.fj/index.php/census-2017).

<sup>5</sup> Fiji Women's Rights Movement (2018). Balance. Obtained from: [www.fwrn.org.fj/images/fwrn2017/balance/Balance-Dec-2018-PRINT-1.pdf](http://www.fwrn.org.fj/images/fwrn2017/balance/Balance-Dec-2018-PRINT-1.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Kumar V. (2018). Report: Only 19 per cent of Fiji businesses registered to women. The Fiji Times. Obtained from: [www.fijitimes.com.fj/report-only-19-per-cent-of-fiji-businesses-registered-to-women/](http://www.fijitimes.com.fj/report-only-19-per-cent-of-fiji-businesses-registered-to-women/).

## The bold move from a male to a female-led workforce: DHL Fiji

### Background

The migration from rural to urban centres in Fiji has resulted in an increasing demand for urban employment. Traditionally, the employment of women in urban areas centred around the garment industry, tourism and retail. However, Fiji's exposure to international markets and information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure opened the door to women working in outsourcing services (OSs). OSs started gaining prominence in the early 2000s, offering women employment, upskilling and income opportunities that the garment industry was not able to support.

### About the intervention

MDF first invested in OSs with DHL Express in 2017. A division of Deutsche Post, DHL began operations in Fiji in 1976 as part of its Asia-Pacific expansion, specialising in logistics and courier services. While there are several logistics companies in Fiji, DHL has proven to be an industry leader due to its implementation of international standards and agile approach towards doing business.

The increase of business transactions in DHL Australia and New Zealand offices prompted DHL Fiji to better position itself in the Asia-Pacific region. DHL Fiji campaigned to prove to the DHL Asia-Pacific board that Fiji could deliver high-quality OSs despite the presence of larger, established players such as the Australia and New Zealand Banking Group and Mindpearl. This assertion led to the establishment of the Business Services section at DHL Fiji to provide new functions such as reporting, debt collection and shipment tracking customer support, which were initially supplied by the Australia and New Zealand offices.

In addition to the solid ICT infrastructure, the employees' neutral English accent and the geographical proximity to Australia and New Zealand, the local office also leveraged a young and vibrant workforce for its back-office

functions. Within this workforce, MDF and DHL saw the potential for women to comprise a larger proportion of staff compared to DHL's core logistics services.

The local office provided the opportunity to create additional employment for well-educated women living in urban areas who were looking for work, offering them the potential for professional growth. DHL wanted to use Cloud PABX technology to establish its OS but was concerned about investing in nascent technology. MDF co-invested to help mitigate this risk, enabling DHL to focus on service delivery and the management of multichannel calls from customers in New Zealand in real time. The co-investment also enabled DHL to attend the Shared Services & Outsourcing Network (SSON) forum in Australia to better understand the processes and challenges of operating an outsourcing business as an independent branch, rather than treating it as an add-on to its logistics business.

### Measuring change

The logistics industry in Fiji has traditionally been male-dominated. DHL Fiji's initial recruitment offered 19 full-time positions targeting men and women equally. However, in the first cycle, the number of women applying for vacancies was proportionally higher, prompting DHL Fiji to re-examine its hiring practices and offer more jobs to women. Shortly after bringing 16 women on board, the DHL management realised that they performed more efficiently than their male counterparts, converting the calls faster and catering to more clients during the day.

DHL clients also provided more positive feedback to female staff, as they were able to resolve the clients' queries more quickly. This outcome prompted DHL to completely change its recruitment policies, targeting and recruiting more women and setting the target of a 65 per cent female workforce.



*"I feel good about our large female workforce because what that tells me is that this company values women. Not only about how we do our work, but that we are also good at the work that we do. It's a man's field, being a logistics company, but when you come here, you'll see that it's mostly women that are here, and I'm proud of that—that they've chosen women to be a part of the company on a larger scale."*

**Savaira Tukuna**  
Duty Billing Officer, DHL Fiji

In addition to recognising the importance of committing to corporate social responsibility, DHL realised the business case behind hiring more women for its new operations. Doing so enabled the company to not only meet but also exceed its targets, as well as increase customer satisfaction.

In 2019, MDF interviewed DHL staff and management to learn more about the company's recruitment practices. The staff expressed substantial satisfaction with their jobs. Ms Savaira Tukana, a Duty Billing Officer, managed the goods and services tax collection and custom charges for shipments to New Zealand. Coming from a major call centre prior to joining DHL, Savaira was one of the few employees already acquainted with the industry and the skills needed to succeed in it, including call etiquette and customer service. Savaira felt that her ability to perform her work efficiently was enhanced by access to training and technology.

With the support and encouragement of a Quality Assurance Officer, Savaira and her team were continuously able to deliver their daily targets and maintain a healthy work-life balance. The team was also extremely content with the company's proactive approach to training and upskilling. According to its internal policies, DHL regularly invests in the education of its staff by enabling them to take courses to advance their studies through a fee-reimbursement arrangement. Savaira highlighted that even if a staff member is reluctant to take advantage of this opportunity, the supervisors and other colleagues encourage them to do so.

The sense of camaraderie that is present at DHL allows the workforce to enjoy the benefits of DHL Global. The Fiji team regularly wins quarterly and annual employee of the month awards, and the employee of the year awardee wins a trip to visit DHL Asia-Pacific in Singapore and a paid holiday. Additionally,

a performance bonus is paid to the best-performing teams at the end of the year, creating healthy competition and a dynamic work environment.

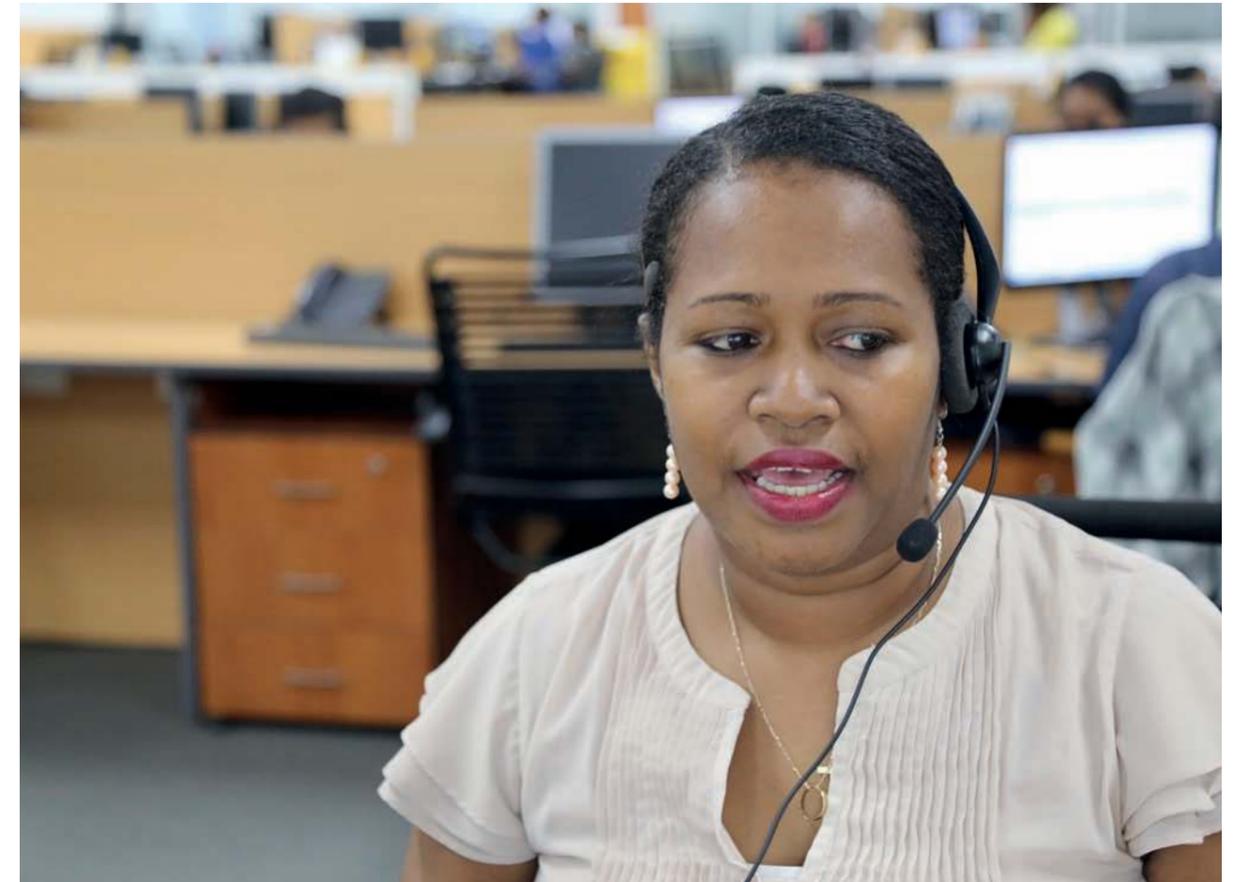
Much like Savaira, other female employees state that the income and benefits provided by DHL allow them to make decisions that improve their lives. From the ability to make investments in home renovations to simply treating themselves, the position with DHL gives them a sense of comfort and healthy ambition. Most of the women see DHL as a stepping stone to better opportunities at DHL Global due to the company's stated commitment to and investment in their well-being.

Savaira proudly states:



*They make working here personal, in the sense that if you're sick, they'll call and ask if you're okay. If a female employee gives birth, the centres in Suva and Nadi send their congratulations. This also applies to male staff and their wives. When someone joins the company, the whole centre signs a welcome note just to welcome them."*

In collaboration with MDF, DHL established a smooth-running outsourcing operation and a team of women who can take charge of their decisions. More women are applying for positions at the DHL Business Services section, which is a testament to the positive work environment that the staff share with their friends and family. As a market leader in logistics, DHL is making strides in creating opportunities for women in urban Suva. Savaira and her colleagues expressed not only the feeling that they received fair pay but also an appreciation that they had the agency to make decisions to improve their own lives.



They conveyed that their employment at DHL gave them fulfilment, satisfaction and happiness, encouraging them to strive for further development.

The results and stories from DHL have prompted the MDF team to continue exploring the outsourcing of business processes. This practice ensures growth for the urban industries of Fiji and opens further job opportunities, especially for young women, who represent about 60 per cent of its workforce. While this presents multiple opportunities for growth for women, it also results in a team of people who can understand and support each other; communication and support arguably contribute to the efficiency of team-based performance.

Investments by DHL, a strong international brand, can act as a stimulus for further investments by similar businesses. The change in women's access to new employment opportunities has generated USD300,000

in additional income for women, resulting in their increased agency in the form of decision-making power around the use of new disposable income. The workplace satisfaction has also resulted in improved job performance, enabling DHL to meet its key performance indicators and expand its reach to start servicing an additional nearshore market (Australia). By co-investing with MDF to achieve business process outsourcing readiness, DHL opened a new branch catering to international markets and relying on women to meet and expand the targets.

Through MDF's work in OSs, women can seek jobs that pay better and are safer compared to the traditional offerings in manufacturing and garments. There are new, arguably better upskilling and growth opportunities for the urban Fijian woman, as reflected in the direct growth of the OS industry in Fiji. Thus, hiring and retaining a healthy female workforce translates to a healthy OS industry.

## Reducing absenteeism in the workplace: Mark One Apparel

### Background

The garment industry in Fiji was once a booming driver of employment, with over 18,000 workers in the late 1990s.<sup>7</sup> At the time, the industry enjoyed several incentives (tax-free zones, tax benefits for exporters and preferential trade agreements such as SPARTECA<sup>8</sup> and ICS<sup>9</sup>) but has been in decline since the early 2000s after the incentives ended. By 2010, the closure of 14 garment factories resulted in the loss of one-third of the total garments export value and the subsequent unemployment of 5,000 garment workers.<sup>10</sup> For the few companies that remained in operation, the loss of preferential agreements and incentives resulted in downsizing and streamlining their businesses, particularly finding niches they could compete in (for which they needed skilled staff). Technical aspects such as using computer-aided design, pattern-making, cutting and engineering remained a challenge. Additionally, companies faced high turnover of low-skilled workers, such as machine operators and seamstresses. Various factors have impacted the turnover, from low wages in the sector to poaching by other garment factories. However, one of the key reasons for female staff leaving the workforce has been “family obligations”. Parenting responsibilities, the inability to find experienced carers or nannies, and family pressure to stay home and protect the children’s safety all put pressure on female staff, contributing to the high turnover.

### About the intervention

Looking at the turnover trends, Mark One Apparel (MK1) considered establishing an employer-sponsored childcare centre on the

factory premises to support children’s well-being and early childhood development. With over 80 per cent of its 360 workers being female, the company aimed to encourage women to participate in the workplace and remain in the industry.

Public childcare is expensive and unaffordable for low-income staff, and urban families are usually nuclear, with no family support network for working mothers. Low-cost workplace childcare is an entirely new model for Fiji. MDF supported MK1 with technical assistance and the architectural planning of the childcare structure. MK1 bore significant investment and handled the administrative bureaucracy required to open a childcare centre in the facility. The Australia Pacific Training Coalition provided technical assistance in return for the childcare centre becoming a Centre of Excellence, and Australian Volunteers will support MK1 in hiring an international director for six months in 2020. The centre opened in January 2019, offering enrolment for 30 children, and currently hosts 20 from ages 2.5 to 5 years.

### Measuring change

MDF and MK1 assessed the early results and success of the childcare centre after ten months of operations. MK1 has already hired three carers/tutors during this period and is in the process of hiring a director. The company also bears the cost of operating the childcare centre, making the cost for parents minimal at FJD5 per day. Parents have shared that they experienced significant savings in income: an average of FJD50 per week, previously spent

*“ You know, when I come to work, I am worried about my kids staying back at home because of what is happening nowadays. Especially for my daughters, because we do not know what they are facing at home and that worries me a lot at work. (...) With the childcare facility, if my kids are here and are safe, everything will run in a good way. It will not affect my production line, and it will not affect my workplace.”*

**Fipe Tikovaca,**  
Assistant Supervisor

on nannies and family members who were taking care of their children. The women also shared that, despite regular payments, their previous nannies were unreliable and often did not show up. Nanny absenteeism resulted in mothers taking unpaid days off of work, ranging from a minimum of two days per year to as frequently as once per month.

Before the construction of the childcare centre, female workers were absent for an average of 3.39 unpaid days per year due to child-rearing, in addition to allocated sick leave. After gaining access to the childcare centre, they missed an average of 2.44 days, primarily consisting of family care leave used to tend to their children when they fell ill. Already, at the initial stage of childcare operations, nearly one day per worker has been saved, resulting in the workers earning additional income. For low-income garment workers, one extra day makes a significant difference, as it contributes to disposable income used for the whole household.

Another important finding concerns staff retention. Four women claimed that they would have left their jobs if the childcare centre had not opened, as they were unable to find nannies, or their husbands were uncomfortable leaving their children with

strangers. For MK1, this has resulted in a reduction in the costs associated with staff turnover, including constant training and decreased productivity. When an experienced team member leaves, training the replacement recruit to full capacity takes up to six months, resulting in productivity losses of over 30 per cent (an experienced machinist operates at 65 per cent efficiency, compared to a new recruit who performs at 30 per cent).

The childcare centre has also had a qualitative impact on the well-being of female workers. The women highly praise the safety of the children in the centre, as they can periodically check on them during lunch and tea breaks. Similarly, the well-being of the women increased simply due to the decreased concern about their children. Many of them shared that they feel more relaxed and focused and, in turn, can help their colleagues who are behind in the production line. The early findings also highlight the educational aspect of the childcare centre, as the children receive education in three languages.

Because the centre is also an early childhood development centre, the women have observed a positive change in their children’s behaviour, stating that the children are more curious, social and well-behaved. Private sector

<sup>7</sup> Fiji Trade and Investment Board (1998).

<sup>8</sup> The South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Co-operation Agreement is a non-reciprocal trade agreement in which Australia and New Zealand offer duty-free and unrestricted access for specified products originating from developing island member countries of the Pacific Islands Forum.

<sup>9</sup> Import Credit Scheme is a subsidy for Australian exporters of textiles, clothing and footwear, which gave Australian manufacturers an incentive to start the manufacturing process in Australia and then export to Fiji for further processing.

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Labour (2001).



investment into early childhood development reflects an understanding of its importance to the child's emotional, social and physical development and maximises the potential for the child's future well-being.

MDF is aware of three additional companies that intend or are already trying to implement employer-sponsored childcare and have reached out to MK1 and MDF for assistance with administration, costs and the hiring

of trained tutors. The International Finance Corporation recently published the report "Tackling Childcare: The Business Case for Employer-Supported Childcare"<sup>11</sup> using the results shared by MK1 and interviews with seven other interested companies. The report lays out the recommendations for the Government of Fiji, including subsidising childcare services and establishing a coherent policy and regulatory framework for Early Childhood Care and Education.

11 International Finance Corporation (2019). Tackling Childcare: The Business Case for Employer Supported Childcare in Fiji. Obtained from: [www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/region\\_ext\\_content/ifc\\_external\\_corporate\\_site/east+asia+and+the+pacific/resources/tackling+childcare-the+business+case+for+employer+supported+childcare+in+fiji](http://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/region_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/east+asia+and+the+pacific/resources/tackling+childcare-the+business+case+for+employer+supported+childcare+in+fiji).

## Challenging norms with new career pathways: VOU

### Background

The development of the arts industry in Fiji faces significant social, cultural and economic challenges. While Fijian culture is woven together from a wealth of traditions spanning from ancient practices to contemporary cultural expressions, the arts industry lacks coordination, effective communication among stakeholders, financial support and national appreciation. Furthermore, the education system has generally excluded the development of the arts.<sup>12</sup> The Fijian Government has heavily invested in heritage conservation over time, but local artists continue to struggle to take advantage of the tourism industry, Fiji's largest GDP contributor, to creatively market, package and commercialise artistic expression into sustainable businesses.<sup>13</sup>

The dance and performing arts industries have faced similar constraints. Fijian families tend to encourage children to enter other traditional occupations in fields such as health, education, accounting and law. However, 20 per cent of Fiji's youth between the ages of 15 and 24 is not involved in education, employment or training, and roughly one out of every three females and one out of every ten males in this age bracket are not actively seeking to be part of the labour market.<sup>14</sup> The performing arts offer young people access to alternative career choices and income-earning opportunities. Nevertheless, societal perceptions around dance and art as a "hobby" and the lack of recognition and job security discourage active female participation in the industry. Dance as

a medium for expression and conversation about important social topics also remains underappreciated.

### About the intervention

Upon the foundation of Vou Dance (Fiji) Limited (VOU) in 2007, there existed a limited perception of dance as a viable career option and sustainable entrepreneurial pursuit. However, in less than a decade, VOU was able to establish itself as Fiji's most versatile, internationally acclaimed and successful contemporary dance company, representing the country in hundreds of shows both locally and abroad. Within local and overseas dance scenes, VOU became synonymous with professionalism, energy and innovation. This reputation was strengthened by VOU's 30 dance troupe, with close to half of the performers being women, who persistently upheld these values.

Since its foundation, VOU has also been able to identify gaps in education, career pathways and job security for dancers that added to the perception that dance is only a hobby rather than a serious option for a lifetime profession. Fijian women experienced these limitations to a higher degree, as their ability to participate in the labour force depended on the level of higher education they attained and their access to safe employment. Due to the prevalence of harassment and assault in Fiji, general safety is one of the concerns that limit where

12 Secretariat of the Pacific Community (2010). Regional Consultation on the Cultural Industries: Report of Meeting. Noumea: Secretariat of the Pacific Community. Obtained from: [www.spcfpstore1.blob.core.windows.net/digitallibrary-docs/files/1e/1e26903c33f9c6dbacef9d647af198dd.pdf?sv=2015-12-11&sr=b&sig=SkViXVmtkr7vuJRpB6DNZFxICCu3dSAmNABYXRJ5WtE=&se=2020-09-26T20%3A29%3A25Z&sp=r&rsc=public,max-age=864000,max-stale=86400&rsct=application%2Fpdf&rscd=inline%3Bfilename%3DREGIONAL\\_CONSULTATION\\_ON\\_THE\\_CULTURAL\\_INDUSTRIES.pdf](http://www.spcfpstore1.blob.core.windows.net/digitallibrary-docs/files/1e/1e26903c33f9c6dbacef9d647af198dd.pdf?sv=2015-12-11&sr=b&sig=SkViXVmtkr7vuJRpB6DNZFxICCu3dSAmNABYXRJ5WtE=&se=2020-09-26T20%3A29%3A25Z&sp=r&rsc=public,max-age=864000,max-stale=86400&rsct=application%2Fpdf&rscd=inline%3Bfilename%3DREGIONAL_CONSULTATION_ON_THE_CULTURAL_INDUSTRIES.pdf).

13 McComb, J. F. (2012). Development and Marketing Strategies for Pacific Cultural Industries. Suva: Secretariat of the Pacific Community. Obtained from: [www.spc.int/DigitalLibrary/Doc/HDP/Culture/51404\\_Development\\_and\\_marketing\\_strategies\\_for\\_Pacific\\_cultural\\_industries.html](http://www.spc.int/DigitalLibrary/Doc/HDP/Culture/51404_Development_and_marketing_strategies_for_Pacific_cultural_industries.html).

14 The World Bank (2020). Unemployment, youth total (% of total labour force ages 15-24) (modeled ILO estimate). Obtained from: [www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS](http://www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS).

women are encouraged or allowed to work by their family members.<sup>15, 16</sup> In an attempt to bridge the gaps identified in the market, VOU established Fiji's first one-year Conservatorium of Dance Diploma in Dance program in 2018 for artists accredited with Fiji's Higher Education Commission. Earning the Diploma helped graduates gain recognition as dancers and use their accreditation and experience to access new and safe career pathways.



*I went for my VOU audition by myself without letting my family know. A week before leaving for Nadi and joining VOU, I took the courage to tell my family... My father was out of the country at the time doing peacekeeping duties as a soldier, so my mother had to hear it by herself. I remember her saying 'you need to let papa know.'*

**Giovanna Varea**  
Professional Dancer

MDF and VOU developed another career pathway during MDF's pilot in-house business acceleration program, Fiji Enterprise Engine. VOU re-strategised its business model and decided to open Fiji's first performance theatre, VOU Hub, on the outskirts of Denarau, Fiji's tourism hub in Nadi. VOU offered employment to 60 dancers and 30 backstage staff on a full-time basis upon completion of the VOU Hub. MDF understood the potential for female role models in this industry to inspire younger

generations to choose dance as a profession and a means of communicating important social messages. MDF aimed to support this initiative by ensuring that more women had access to and benefitted from both the financial and non-financial opportunities available via the VOU Hub.

MDF provided support to the VOU Hub in vital business development, sales expertise and the technical configuration of lighting and sound, while VOU bore significant investments in the development of the VOU Hub Arena.



*We want to give equal opportunities to women to thrive and lead in management positions and the creative sector. I advocate for female professions, and I hope we can become an organisation that models itself on equality."*

**Sachiko Soro**  
Director

### Measuring change

The Hub opened in July 2019 and currently offers employment to ten dancers. One of the dancers, Giovanna Varea, expressed the importance of dance in her daily life, heritage and career.

At 20 years of age, and the third-youngest in a family of nine siblings, Giovanna shares that she did not previously consider dance

as a career option. Dance was considered a playful pastime, and she was expected to go to university to pursue a different profession. However, in her final year of high school, she took a "leap of faith" and decided that dance was the path she would follow to find happiness. Her siblings supported her choice, but her parents struggled to accept it. Her father visited her in Nadi after returning from a peacekeeping mission, and although he still wishes she went to university, Giovanna convinced him that dance is the vocation she should follow. She promised him that she would go to university at a later stage in support of her creative arts dream.

Giovanna is now a scholarship student at VOU's newly established Conservatorium of Dance. In VOU's *Fiji Untold* Hub performance, Giovanna plays the character of the Mentor, a wise elderly woman who helps a young Chief's daughter to learn the ancient and sacred stick dance of her people. Apart from the *Fiji Untold* show, Giovanna is also part of the VOU dance team, which offers cultural performances at local prominent five-star hotels and abroad. She studies and works close to 12 hours a day, five days a week, and shares the accommodation with five other dance colleagues.

Like many of her peers, Giovanna was not expecting to work and study at the same time. However, with VOU's support, she can save 10 per cent of her income for family emergencies and her studies. She also feels that she has become more mature, her siblings are proud of her, and she is on the path to becoming a choreographer. Giovanna believes that dancing runs in her blood, as her grandfather was a traditional choreographer from Rotuma, a Polynesian island in Fiji. In Giovanna's words, "My dream is to follow in his footsteps of creating traditional Rotuman dances called Tautonga, bringing to this my experience as a contemporary dancer."

Dancing, teaching and entrepreneurship have been slow to gain acceptance as professions in Fiji. However, since the establishment of several Fiji-based dance companies and theatres (VOU, Oceania Dance Theatre and Rako Pasefika), the arts movement is making an impact on communities and their perceptions. For all aspiring dancers, Giovanna says that it is never too late to start.

The full impact of the intervention will take additional time to manifest, but ten dancers have already been employed full-time in the first year, and another 20 will be hired by 2022. The VOU Hub is becoming a cultural centre in Fiji, offering tourists a completely new experience and changing the norms surrounding dance and other performing arts. With Giovanna in the lead role, dance can become not only a career but also a channel to discuss and challenge social norms. MDF's experience with VOU has also highlighted other qualitative benefits for young women in dance. VOU has provided a safety net for youth suffering from mental illness, as well as an emotional outlet through dance for those struggling with personal tragedy.

With the support of the arts industries and the inclusion of more female dancers, women will have greater access to alternative career choices and income-earning opportunities, creating more role models for younger Fijian girls. Dance as a support mechanism and a tool for expression will also lead to changing social norms around principal issues affecting women, such as gender stereotypes and mental illness, contributing to society's overall well-being.

<sup>15</sup> Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (2013). *Somebody's Life, Everybody's Business!* Suva: Fiji Women's Crisis Centre. Obtained from: [www.fijiwomen.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/National-Survey-Summary.pdf](http://www.fijiwomen.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/National-Survey-Summary.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Pacific Women. *Ending Violence Against Women*. Obtained from: [www.pacificwomen.org/our-work/focus-areas/ending-violence-against-women/](http://www.pacificwomen.org/our-work/focus-areas/ending-violence-against-women/).

## Conclusion

MDF's WEE framework has redefined the team's approach to WEE and its understanding of women's contributions, opportunities, challenges and involvement in various economic spheres. Over the last two years, the results and discoveries have revealed further opportunities for building better business cases around engaging and retaining female workers.

The three case studies presented in *Women at Work* provide a snapshot of common findings that MDF encounters and show the potential of Fiji's private sector; however, they are not a definitive representation of the situation. MDF has demonstrated how women can benefit from economic empowerment even when they are not at the point of transaction; interventions that focus on women playing a supporting role can still have a positive impact on their empowerment.<sup>3</sup>

The results of the case studies present a valid business case to the private sector that hiring and retaining more women can decrease turnover and increase productivity. They also illustrate that the business case can apply to different types of interventions and that increased access can equally benefit both the private sector and women.

Additionally, the results highlight that encouraging women's access to information, goods, services and opportunities impacts not only their economic advancement but also the

different areas of their agency and non-financial benefits. Thus, the relevance of having women in the workforce extends beyond economic impact and increased GDP into the realm of income allocation, changing of norms and promoting the overall improvement of well-being.

Moreover, the connection between access and agency remains an essential point for investigation. Although measuring access is straightforward, determining its impact on agency requires additional study to fully understand both the positive and negative effects of increased female participation in the workforce. Periodic measurement of agency dimensions can allow the programs to identify and invest in new business ideas and enhance their interventions. For example, an increase in women's workload might prompt a program investing in support services.

MDF continues to present the business case, when needed, to encourage private sector companies to address the challenges women face in market participation, clearly stipulating how addressing such constraints supports both the business's bottom line and its female workers. MDF also continues to refine the measurement techniques of WEE, ensuring that each investment positively impacts women's access and agency, regardless of whether the women are at work, on the farm or leading an SME.

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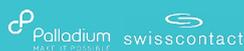
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