Turning the tide: Innovation for women's economic opportunity in Yasawa-i-rara

Inclusion story

Globally, **the demand for eco-conscious and authentic tourism products and experiences is growing**. This trend presents a unique opportunity for indigenous resource owners and remote island communities. However, in Fiji, limited infrastructure and resources—such as accurate hydrographic maps—have hindered many smaller islands from capitalising on this opportunity.

Over the past six years, MDF has worked with the Republic of Fiji Navy, cruise agent Kenua Fiji and the iTaukei Trust Fund Board (TTFB) to address some of these challenges. MDF's work with these partners aligns with the Fiji Government's National Sustainability Tourism Framework and commitment to supporting the economic participation of remote and indigenous communities.

In 2018, the Republic of Fiji Navy, Kenua Fiji and MDF collaborated to update the hydrographic map of the Yasawa Group of islands. This update ensured that the map met international insurer requirements for the safe passage of cruise ships, enabling Kenua Fiji to promote the island as a cruise destination.

In early 2024, the people of Yasawa-i-Rara, on the northern tip of the Yasawa Group, welcomed the return of cruise tourism after 16 years. This marked the beginning of a new chapter for Yasawa-i-Rara, providing the community with an opportunity to develop tourism products that showcase their unique cultural, historical and natural heritage.

Community driven tourism development

Almost 120km and a five-hour boat journey from Nadi, the Yasawa-i-Rara Women's Group is leading a transformation. The island community has primarily relied on income from fishing and remittances to support livelihoods, but now, the return of cruise tourism has opened the door to sharing Yasawa-i-Rara's unique beauty with more visitors.

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*The Yasawa-i-Rara Women's Group is a diverse collective, **bringing together women of all ages**—older women passing down traditional skills, young women eager to explore new opportunities, single mothers balancing family and work, and women with disabilities finding new ways to contribute.*

Each member brings a unique strength, and through training, they have been able to refine their skills, enhance the visitor experience, and create meaningful economic opportunities for themselves and their families.

Recognising the potential of cruise tourism, the community came together to ensure they were fully prepared. Fueled by the Fijian principle of solesolevaki (the spirit of unity to achieve a common goal), in 2024 the community underwent training in tour guiding, first aid and culinary skills with support from TTFB and MDF.

"We used to welcome tourists without any structured program," explains Sera Tagaiya, a member of the women's group. "But the community preparedness training has changed our approach, strengthening the spirit of 'solesolevaki' and ensuring everyone plays a complementary role, creating a more organised experience for both tourists and locals."

Once Kenua Fiji began promoting the Yasawa Group, it became clear that the community needed to prepare for cruise tourists. Because of the small island chain's relative distance from Fiji's two main islands, tourists from Nadi rarely visited, particularly to the northern-most point of Yasawa-i-Rara. Women would only occasionally get the opportunity to sell handicrafts to passing yachts or visitors from nearby hotels or the mainland.

MDF's partnership with TTFB supported community readiness training, market access and links to visitors seeking sustainable and responsible tourism experiences.

Beyond refining their products, the training empowered women with tools and skills to expand their roles and contribute to household decision-making. The training supported the women to recast their everyday tasks of cooking and making handicrafts into a marketable skill. Their growing financial independence has earned them respect within the community, with men now hiring equipment from the group, recognising their leadership in managing local resources.

Building economic resilience

Following the success of the *Seabourn Pursuit* cruise ship visit, the women's group seized opportunities to share their knowledge and build economic opportunities for the group and their households. They established a working group to coordinate the development of products for sale during cruise visits and manage the equipment provided by TTFB and MDF. The tents, tables and chairs used to host cruise visitors are also hired out for special occasions in the village, generating additional income for the women's group.

After the success of the cruise day, the community created a dedicated weekly meeting to share knowledge about weaving and cooking. The sessions were supported by the village elders, acknowledging the importance of preserving their culture and traditions.

"This is an opportunity for us as women to come together to discuss how we can assist our men in village development and activities, as well as educate younger women about our role in the community," says Sera.

Cruising ahead

Ahead of the next cruise liner visit in 2025, TTFB is working with the women on follow-up creative arts training, including whole nut processing, fashion design, textile printing and intricate basket weaving. The training builds on traditional skills that Sera and the other women have practiced all their lives—the upskilling is in developing traditional products that also appeal to visitors.

"I made up my mind to stick with the whole coconut processing training," shares Sera. "We learned that the parts of the coconut that we usually burn or throw away can earn extra money for us. For example, I can make around 30 pairs of earrings a day."

The increase in tourism is providing women with new opportunities to gain skills, confidence and earn an income to support their families.

> *At first, I thought it would be the norm for the men to operate the machines for us but when we were given the chance to operate the machines, we became confident that we can operate them safely. So, while the men are on the farm or out at sea, we can both achieve something that helps our family livelihoods.*

Support from her husband has been crucial in Sera's entrepreneurial journey.

"My husband was also interested in the training. We are envisioning that when we send fish to nearby resorts or the market in Lautoka, we can also sell some of our whole nut products."

Sera believes the training has given the community renewed hope for more economic opportunities for their island.

> *We have been fasting and praying about this for years and believe this is our time to reap the rewards. For us to realise the benefit of the trainings, it's important that we should not sleep on these skills but keep on practicing and start selling our products either individually or collectively through the women's group.*

Why invest in community readiness?

While investing in marketing and promotion is crucial to the development of emerging or new destinations, ensuring that the destination is ready for visitors is often as important. Investing in community readiness enables host populations to build skills, understand visitor sentiment and ensure that measures are in place to protect natural assets. Community readiness also ensures the sustainability of the tourism practice because it engages multiple stakeholders, all of whom stand to gain from the initiative.

A visitor-ready community also makes for a more rewarding experience for visitors – and even a return visit or word-of-mouth recommendation.

*Click/scan to watch TTFB video on **Yasawa-i-rara creative arts training**.*