

Policy, practice and partnership progress for gender equality in Pacific Island fisheries

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Gender equality is critical for effective and equitable conservation and development outcomes in coastal countries. Commitments to gender equality have surged, yet the depth and effectiveness of these commitments are unclear.

Gender equality is a core principle of good environmental governance and sustainable development. Progress toward gender equality in the fisheries sector is critical for effective and equitable conservation and development outcomes in coastal countries. Commitments to gender equality have surged at the global, regional and national levels, yet there is a lack of convincing evidence to suggest that conservationist and environmentalist agendas are achieving gender equality outcomes. A joint research venture by the authors sought to understand and assess progress toward gender equality using the case of small-scale fisheries in the Pacific Islands region.

Key informant interviews were conducted with practitioners and managers engaged in small-scale fisheries (n = 74), and gender and development (n = 26) sectors in the Pacific to understand organisational values, approaches and barriers that affect the adoption and implementation of gender equality commitments. We combined these data with a systematic analysis of 76 influential gender and fisheries policy instruments used in the region to understand the rationales

and priorities for such commitments. Here, we summarise the findings from our four scientific publications.

Within fisheries policy, the concept of gender tended to only focus on women, rather than diverse social identities, norms and relations. Rationales for pursuing gender equality were predominately instrumental (i.e. as a means to achieve ecological goals and/or shallow project performance targets), rather than intrinsic (i.e. because of an inherent value in fairness) (Fig. 1). Our findings illustrate that gender equality commitments and investments are largely rhetorical, narrow and outdated (Lawless et al. 2021).

We examined the gender approaches applied in fisheries practice, including potential barriers to their implementation. Although fisheries organisations approached gender inclusion in diverse ways, when critically evaluated according to gender best practice we found 76.2% of approaches were designed to “reach” women, and very few “benefited”, “empowered”, or “transformed” women’s lives (Johnson et al. 2018; Mangubhai and Lawless 2021).

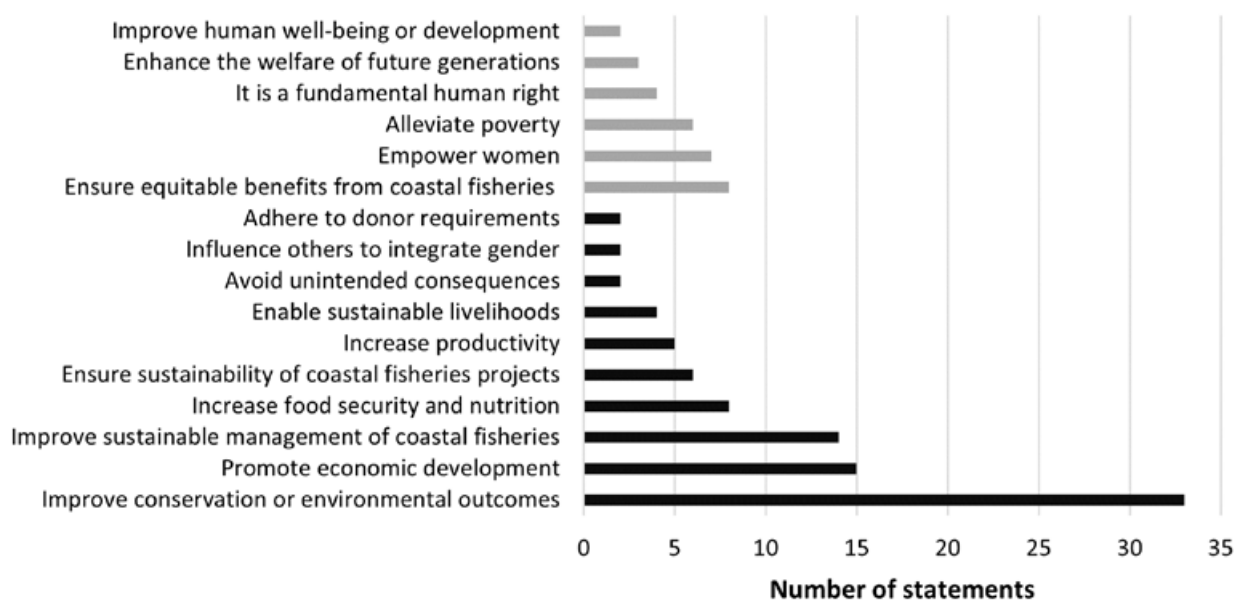


Figure 1. Number of statements (n = 121) indicating the dominant reasons for why gender equality was pursued as a governance principle in, with and alongside, small-scale fisheries. Reasons are organised according to whether they were intrinsic (grey bars, n = 30) or instrumental (black bars, n = 91).

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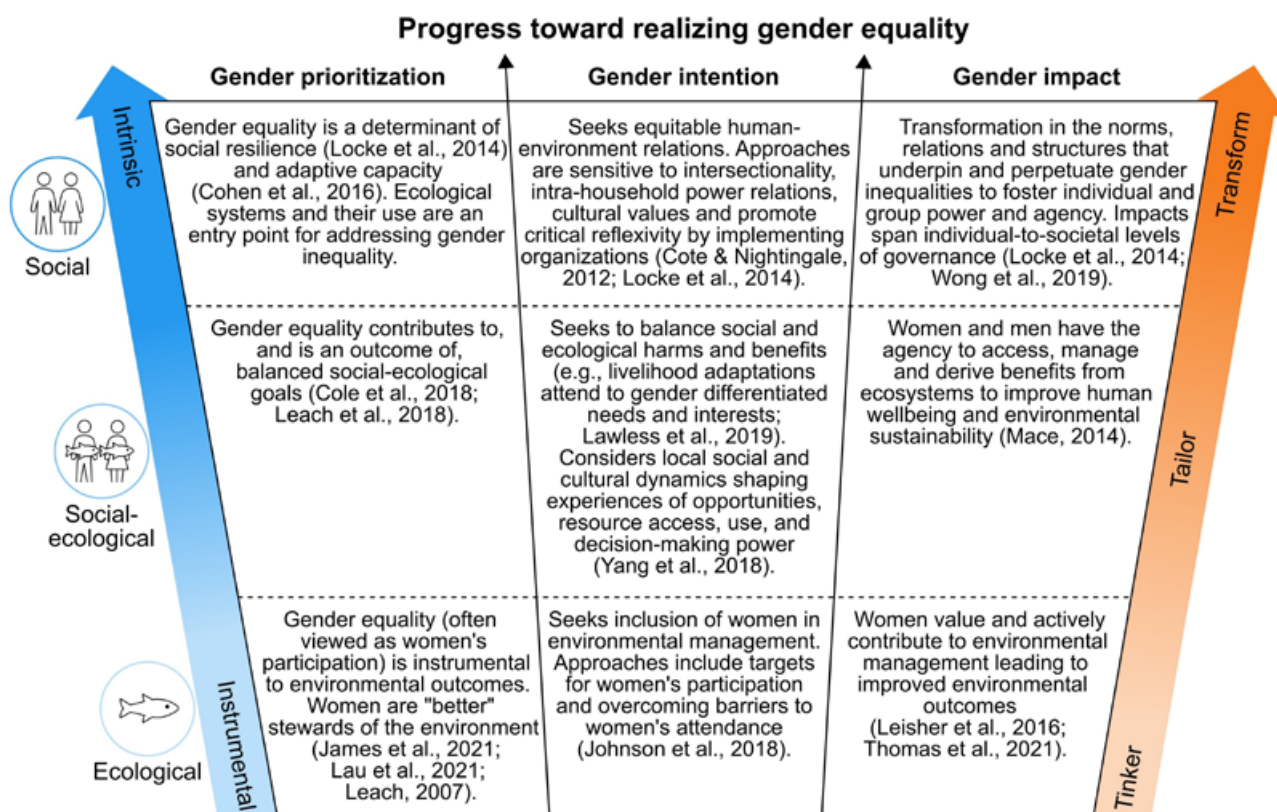


Figure 2. Our proposition based on: 1) three social-ecological narratives about the relationship between humans and the environment; 2) their intersection with organisational priorities, intentions and impacts for gender equality; 3) their alignment with instrumental (i.e. non-gender) and intrinsic (i.e. socially just and fair) goals; and 4) the type of impacts they are likely to achieve (tinker-tailor-transform) (Source: Lawless et al. 2022).

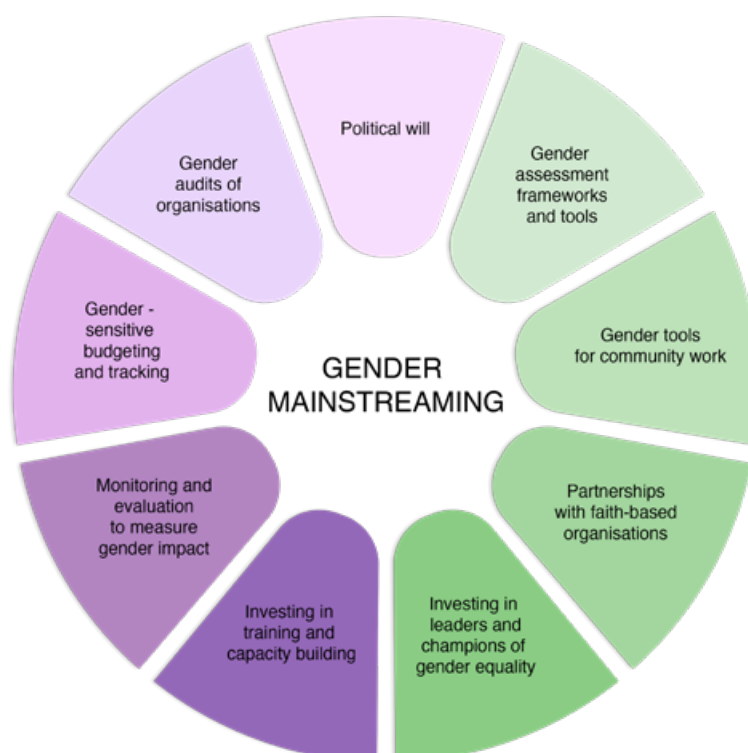


Figure 3. Opportunities identified by development practitioners to mainstream gender into the fisheries sector. Purple = institutional culture and practice, green = practice for implementation of projects and programmes (Mangubhai et al. 2022, this issue).

To understand the narratives underpinning these narrow gender approaches, we developed a novel “tinker-tailor-transform” gender assessment typology to understand the desired intentions and impacts of fisheries organisations (Fig. 2). We found that fisheries organisations tended to “tinker” with gender equality (e.g. include more women in spaces dominated by men such as fisheries meetings or projects), rather than actively address or transform differences between women and men (Lawless et al. 2022).

We found that the “low benchmark” for acceptable gender policy and practice was, in part, due to fisheries practitioners having little to no access to qualified gender focal points and training, and limited networks with gender experts. Our final study explored opportunities for the fisheries sector to build on decades of knowledge, learning and experience from the development sector. We suggest four strategic partnership areas: 1) shifting values, 2) gender mainstreaming (Fig. 3), 3) adopting gender best practice, and 4) investing in gender networks and coalitions. We argue that fundamental to the success of such a partnership is the ability and willingness of fisheries and development practitioners and their organisations to work collaboratively towards gender equality in the fisheries sector (Mangubhai et al. 2022, this issue).

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