

Development of marine resources, fisheries policies and women's rights in the Pacific Islands

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Introduction

This paper illustrates the importance of marine resources in the Pacific Islands, and analyses current and emerging issues relating to fisheries policies and how these may affect women in the fisheries sector in the region. Some initiatives to integrate gender issues are outlined and other possible avenues for women's greater involvement through incorporating their interests and concerns are discussed.

In setting the scene, a brief background on the importance of and major issues associated with the fisheries sector in the Pacific Islands is presented, followed by a description of efforts in mainstreaming gender concerns. This paper points out that while basic problems such as limited access to resources, and subordination, continue to persist, there are new and more complex problems now facing women (e.g. the globalization of fishing industry), which require greater scrutiny of fisheries policies at a higher level. Some options are explored, including suggestions such as involving women in higher levels of decision-making on fisheries issues, and a regional and international action plan to reduce the negative impacts of the global fish trade.

Importance of marine resources for Pacific Island economies

The Pacific Islands region² consists of only 550,000 km² of land with 5.2 million people spread across 33 million km² of ocean. Except for Papua New Guinea, which accounts for 83% of the region's total land area, all the other islands are small, with land accounting for only about 2% of the total area. The region occupies one-sixth of the earth's surface, an area three times larger than the United States or China (Low no date). The small landmasses distributed over a large area of ocean are linked and controlled by the marine environment.

The dependence of Pacific Island countries upon marine resources has been a vital part of their social and economic development. As population increases, this dependence has become even more critical. The ocean is seen as a lifeline that "provides the greatest opportunities for economic development" (Secretariat of the Pacific Community 2002). The coastal and marine ecosystems of the Pacific Islands region are extremely important habitats for sustaining the livelihood of the region's people by providing food and nutritional security. The exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of Pacific Island countries support the world's largest tuna resources, which are worth over a billion dollars. It is estimated that the region contributes to about 60% of global tuna demand for canning and 30% of the tuna for the high-value Japanese sashimi market (Gillett et al. 2001).

The fisheries sector in most Pacific Island countries is divided in two main types: coastal (characterized by artisanal technology, community-based systems, inshore or nearshore areas, formal and informal production systems) and offshore (characterized by capital intensive, export-orientated, industrial) activities. These divisions are used to show their relative importance in Pacific Island economies and the major issues surrounding the fisheries sector.

Offshore fisheries

The highly migratory tuna resources in the EEZs of island countries largely dominate the offshore fisheries.

The tuna industry is characterized by foreign purse-seine operations under access agreements, largely targeting skipjack tuna for canning and yellowfin tuna for the frozen tuna market. The longline fishery consists of foreign and domestic vessels that target the fresh and chilled sashimi markets. Foreign vessels currently dominate the fishery. In May 2005,

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2. Includes 22 Pacific Island countries and territories: American Samoa, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, French Polynesia, Fiji, Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Northern Marianas, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Pitcairn Island, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Wallis and Futuna.

87% of the vessels on the Forum Fisheries Agency Vessel Monitoring Register were foreign vessels and 13% domestic flagged vessels (Forum Fisheries Agency 2005).

The current stock assessment of tuna resources by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (2003) indicates that the skipjack population is in a healthy state, while yellowfin are nearing full-exploitation and levels of bigeye exploitation appear not to be sustainable. Conservation and management concerns over the long-term sustainability of stocks has led to the establishment of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, whose membership includes distant-water fishing nations and Pacific Island countries. Since fishing efforts are likely to be curbed under the new Commission, issues on possible allocation are likely to arise, and these will have implications for women who are directly or indirectly involved in the sector. The international trade and development agenda overlies this, particularly through the influence of the major donors who also have fishing interests and who are members of the Commission, and who have the world's major tuna markets. This creates another complex scenario that is likely to affect how the fisheries sector in the Pacific Islands region will progress and its effect on women's work.

Coastal fisheries

Because the majority of Pacific Islands are atolls and small islands surrounded by coral reefs, the principal targets of coastal fisheries are species associated with coral reefs and lagoons. Coastal fisheries are extremely important in the Pacific Islands because they provide a major source of employment, food and nutritional security. As many as 83% of the coastal households of the Solomon Islands, 35% of the rural households of Vanuatu, 99% of the rural households of Kiribati, 87% of the households in the Marshall Islands, and half of the rural households in Upolu, Samoa fish primarily for local consumption (World Bank 1995; Dalzell et al 1996). Further evidence of Pacific Island dependence on subsistence fisheries for food security indicates that seafood comprises 28%, 33%, 67%, and 77% of all animal protein consumed in Fiji, Vanuatu, Kiribati and Solomon Islands, respectively (World Bank 2000; Dalzell and Schug 2002). It is estimated that some Pacific Island countries would have to spend an additional USD 7–18 million a year for imported protein if subsistence fisheries did not exist (World Bank 2000).

While the socioeconomic importance of coastal fisheries is underscored, there are however increased fishing pressure on these resources due to changing lifestyles that create greater economic pressure to increase production. The rise in population and adoption of efficient fishing technology further adds

to this pressure. Coastal fisheries are also vulnerable to environmental impacts of land-based activities and pollution. The inadequacy of centralized management systems has seen a trend towards devolving fisheries management responsibilities to coastal communities. Anecdotal evidence, however indicates that women continue to play subordinate roles even when there is a move towards revitalizing such community-based fisheries management systems.

Initiatives to incorporate gender issues in the fisheries sector

Many Pacific Island countries are signatories to international conventions and agreements to improve the status and well-being of women in their countries such as the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) and the Beijing Platform for Action (1995). The sustainable development agenda also requires the integration of economy and environment with gender equity and justice. This is clearly stated in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1992), the International Conference on Population and Development (1994) and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002). At the regional level, the adoption of the Pacific Platform for Action (1994) indicates the collective concerns and reaffirms the commitment by Pacific Island countries for national action to promote the advancement of women.

Some notable progress has been made in the last 10 to 15 years, such as the establishment of the South Pacific Women's Bureau at the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), appointment of a Gender Issues Adviser, a Gender Working Group within the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, and the strengthening of the regional role of the United Nations Development Fund for Women. The Coastal Fisheries Programme at SPC focuses on women's issues in fisheries under its Community Fisheries Project. This project is commendable in that it carries out basic research on documenting women's contribution to household income and food security. It also runs workshops for women in countries on fish processing, small business management and other value-adding activities. The need for such research and data is however based on individual country needs and priorities where SPC plays only a facilitating role. SPC also produces an information bulletin under the Special Interest Group for "Women in Fisheries" to inform readers about its activities and research findings.

At the national level, each country has a national plan of action and has established a focal point or a department that is tasked to promote the advancement and welfare of women. There are women's networks in the three sub-regions and women-focused

non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that play important advocacy roles in terms of addressing women's practical needs such as access to credit, improving literacy levels, and improving awareness of family nutrition and health. These activities are not necessarily fisheries-sector specific, but they do benefit women in general, including fishers, in fulfilling their basic needs. The fisheries departments in the region also have a designated person responsible for addressing gender-related concerns and/or to oversee women's projects.

Fisheries departments throughout the region have become more aware of the role women play in coastal and inshore fisheries in relation to providing for food security, generating household income, and in alleviating poverty. This realization of gender-disaggregated information into the fisheries sector has largely been through donor-led initiatives and NGO advocacy such as the Women and Fisheries Network. Donor policies such as those of the Canada International Development Agency (CIDA) require gender analysis for all its projects. While the process is ongoing, it is still slow. Fisheries extension officers are however more tolerant on gender issues because of the realization that women do play a key informal role in coastal project implementation even though they may not necessarily be the main beneficiaries or recipients of project assistance. Thus, community workshops on new projects such as seaweed and pearl farming or coral planting most often encourage women to be present when providing advice on the technical details of the projects that are targeted at men as project leaders.³

In short, the process of mainstreaming gender into national planning and integrating gender considerations into project development is continuing, but progress is slow due to both practical and strategic reasons. Complications arise further as fisheries managers and policy makers now have to grapple with the rapid transformation and change in the fisheries sector. It seems that considering gender dimensions could only eventuate as an after-the-fact issue. There is, therefore, a need for greater advocacy and awareness into the medium- to long-term policy considerations in the fisheries sector. This will require a coordinated effort by NGOs, women's groups and researchers.

Women and development issues

Some preliminary insights into gender-related policy implications within the fisheries sector are discussed by focussing on the industrial and artisanal sectors. A gender perspective aims to expose the contradictory processes that are at play with the shift towards a globalized economy aimed at improving the welfare of society at large. The political underpinning of donor assistance to help Pacific countries integrate into the world economy is explained by looking at the case of the European Union, which has been a major donor in the region since the independence of the Pacific Island countries.

ACP-EU Economic Partnership Agreement

The objective of the economic and trade cooperation between the African Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states and the European Community under the Cotonou Agreement (2000)⁴ is to "foster the smooth and gradual integration of the ACP states into the world economy, thereby promoting their sustainable development and contributing to poverty eradication in the ACP countries" [Article 34(1)]. The Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) must be one that is mutually beneficial to both parties, as opposed to the previous Lomé Convention that was non-reciprocal. In the case of Pacific ACP states, fisheries and tourism are the key sectors identified as areas of mutual interest in fostering trade relations. The western and central Pacific fisheries resources, particularly tuna fisheries, are of interest to the European Union (EU), which represents the world's largest canned tuna market, while the Pacific tuna has the world's largest tuna stock. Negotiations for an EPA are continuing while a number of bilateral fisheries agreements are already in place.

The Cotonou Agreement provides the umbrella framework for EPA negotiations. The most notable of the provisions that determine preferential access of the PACP exports to the EU market is that of the conditions of the Rules of Origin (RoO).⁵ Under the RoO, fish caught outside of ACP states' territorial seas will only be granted originality status if the vessels that caught the fish comply with registration, ownership, flag state and employment conditions. For example, if fish caught within the EEZ of a

3. This is because women, as members of their households, often ensure the project remains viable and survives in order to ensure there is flow of income for the household. Fisheries officers also realize that the credibility of the project hinges on women who take on the practical responsibility of the project. Problems sometime lie in women's lack of access to loans and/or social attitudes that men — as heads of households — should be the key targets for project acceptability in traditional communities.
4. This is a successor agreement to Lomé IV Convention between the African, Caribbean and the Pacific (ACP) States and the European Community that provides the regulatory framework for preferential access to the EU market for the ACP countries. The Agreement sets a timeframe for a progression towards reciprocal Economic Partnership Agreement between the EU and ACP countries. The Agreement places emphasis on providing an integrated approach to poverty reduction through strategies that focus on economic development, social and human development, and regional cooperation and integration.
5. Cotonou Agreement Annex V Protocol I - Rules of Origin (RoO) lays the criteria for determining the economic nationality of the goods. The aim is to ensure that concessionary market access granted to a given country or a region, benefits the intended recipient(s).

ACP state by vessels owned by third party country, will not be treated as originating fish unless there is a joint ownership of the vessel of at least 50% by the nationals of ACP states, the EU or its overseas territories or if the crew composition is at least 50% of the nationals of the ACP, EU or its overseas territories. Vessels will also need to be registered in and fly the flag of the ACP, EU or its overseas countries and territories.

In the case of lease or charter arrangements, the ACP state has to first offer the opportunity to negotiate a fisheries agreement with EU and only when they have not accepted the offer then vessels could be chartered or leased under certain conditions. Provisions relating to processed fish and rules on derogation are also restrictive.⁶

The EU's RoO are highly restrictive in granting of preference to third countries that may operate in the region. EU canneries such as those in Spain and France are protected through tariffs applied to imports from third countries. This protection under the RoO is applicable to the EU tuna fleets, which indirectly prevents the Pacific ACP states from using fish caught by foreign non-EU vessels to produce originating fish. In practice, this means that ACP states have to grant EU vessels preferential access to their EEZs as against those from third countries in order to gain preferential access by duty concessions to the EU market.

Furthermore, the EU's proposal to the World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations on fisheries subsidies provides another insight into the EU's real intention in terms of re-structuring its own members' vessels and their fishing industry. Subsidies for permanent transfers of fishing vessels to third countries, including through the creation of joint enterprises with third country partners, are considered as prohibited subsidies, whereas subsidies to mitigate negative consequences of restructuring the fisheries sector is considered as permitted. Among these include support for diversification and limited modernization that improve quality, safety, and working conditions (WTO 2003; WTO 2005). In other words, vessels that could be temporarily moved to new fishing grounds become beneficiaries of government assistance such as those that shift from over-exploited fishing grounds to less exploited areas like those that move to the western and central Pacific.

Thus, while the EPA's intention is to assist Pacific Islands in developing partnerships in industry, the above developments effectively mean that the EU is largely interested in accessing the vast tuna resources of the western and central Pacific. This allows for a

continuous supply of fish to its canneries and, where vessels would have preference to land catches in EU member ports, to benefit from the concessions.

What are then, the gender implications from this emerging development in the tuna industry? First, it creates a move away from domestic industry development to providing access to EU vessels that seldom land catches for domestic processing. Instead they use local ports to transship their catches to be processed in EU member countries or their own territories. The strict RoO requirements for originating fish also limit the use of third country vessels to land catch for domestic processing that could qualify for preferential access to the EU markets. Consequently, this has the potential to reduce shored-based development activities and therefore reduce employment and other benefits, from-value adding in the region where women have been the major players. The EU's stringent quality-control requirements also limit processing and exports from the Pacific Islands to the EU. There is a need to lobby for a flexible RoO so that fish caught by other third country vessels in the EEZ, such as domestic based foreign vessels, could be landed and processed in the Pacific Islands for the EU markets under preferential access.

In order to access the EU preferential market for processed fish, one Pacific Island country has licensed domestic based foreign vessels to fish within its territorial seas in order to qualify for originating fish. This is a rather worrying trend as most of the subsistence and artisanal fisheries also exist within territorial seas. Having foreign vessels fish close to coastal areas for industrial processing is likely to create conflicts with artisanal fishers. The fishing grounds used by women in particular may be particularly vulnerable.

Under the Development Assistance component of the Cotonou Agreement, capacity building and training has been ongoing in order to assist Pacific Island countries in meeting EU export quality standards (e.g. funding for training in Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point — HACCP). However, if EU vessels have little incentive to land their catch in local ports, then while there may be some spin-off benefits from capacity building, accessing the EU market continues to remain a hurdle. Another component of the Development Assistance also focuses on assistance to the artisanal fisheries sector to generate income and reduce poverty. Commercial production in the artisanal sector has been limited to commodities where women are not direct beneficiaries of projects but participate by default, such as the cultivation of seaweed and pearl farming.

6. See details in the Cotonou Agreement – Annex V, Protocol 1 – Article 3.

The informal nature of women's work limits their direct accessibility to such development assistance schemes.

STDs/HIV infections through increase foreign fishing fleets

A major policy initiative of a number of Pacific Island countries has been the development of their domestic tuna industries through various strategies in order to increase their economic benefits from tuna resources. While increased transshipment activities and domestic basing of foreign vessels provide increased economic benefits, they also increase social problems and the risk of sex-related diseases for women. Studies as well as anecdotal information indicate an increase in social problems related to alcohol and drugs and the rise in prostitution where there is increase in sea port activities related to fishing fleets (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2000; Vunisea 2005a). There is also a correlation between such activities and an increase in sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS infected cases (Vunisea 2005b). In all the major ports throughout the Pacific Islands, where foreign fishing vessels berth, there is increased concern by health authorities because this is a growing problem affecting young women. Women, as young as 15 years old, have been apprehended by police officers on fishing vessels when in port (Vunisea 2005b). Social problems increase when female victims have difficulty in raising their children when such crew are gone from the scene as noted by Agassi (2005) in the Solomon Islands.

The need for tighter security in port areas to both deter young women from loitering around and keep track of crew that come ashore (as monitoring and surveillance measure, without violating human rights) is necessary. The legal system in many of the Pacific Island countries is inadequate to handle such offences because there is lack of policy and inadequate supporting legislation. Police do not have the power to deter, arrest and prosecute in most cases. While efforts are made by health authorities and NGOs to raise awareness, it is insufficient to convince women who may be hard pressed to earn a living to support their families and or because of the breakdown of traditional societal moral values. Regional fisheries departments do not see this as a fisheries sector problem, and neither the Ports nor Maritime Authorities recognise this under their ambit. There is a need for greater cooperation and coordinated effort among the various institutions to minimize the risks associated with such activities.

Fisheries policies could be designed with clearly laid out rules and regulations on the conditions of access. For example, requiring foreign vessels to employ local crew that would not only increase

domestic employment but would minimize the exploitation of young vulnerable island women since it would be culturally unacceptable for them to be prostitutes with men of their culture. Also, using local crew would mean that the men would return to their families, unlike foreign crew who come to relax without much commitment when they are in foreign ports.

There is a need for people in policy decision-making positions who are sensitive to real problems that are not only social and cultural in nature, but have huge long-term economic costs by affecting women's reproductive health and well-being. New innovative ideas need to be designed to tackle these cross-cutting issues.

The increased globalization of the fishing industry means the movement of fishing vessels from industrialized countries to developing and least developing countries will accelerate. There is therefore a need for a concerted and coordinated effort to design a regional and/or international action plan to deter and reduce the risks associated such activities because the victims are women in both developed and developing countries. An educational awareness program, including provisions for counselling may also be necessary for women who may fall victim.

Creating efficiency in fish processing sector

An examination of globalization and the effects of development policies on women in canneries and processing plants raises concerns on the status of women and their work. In the processing sector (e.g. fish canneries), women make up the bulk of the labor force (90%) and in the fresh tuna processing establishments they comprise 30% to 80% of the workers (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2000). The majority of these women continue to be involved in routine work along the processing lines that command the lowest wages.

With trade liberalization, there is a subtle effect of driving down wages to maintain a company's competitive edge. The case study of the Pacific Fishing Company (Pafco) by Rajan (2005) clearly demonstrates how market pressures influence the working conditions of women. Women workers remain in "temporary" positions for several years, and as many such as 20 years, receiving very little (if any) pay increments. While some women have received on-the-job training, this has not been reflected in their wages. By keeping a large number of female employees as casual laborers, a company avoids paying any benefits that may otherwise accrue to staff. Performance standards are set at such high levels that women find it hard to achieve the targets to gain any promotion or pay increment.

The globalization of the tuna industry by multinational companies such as Bumble Bee, in the case of Fiji, has strategically taken advantage of vulnerable situations like Pafco. Many canneries and processing factories are located in remote location of developing countries where employment options are limited (Bonanno and Constance 1996). Women are drawn to such employment opportunities but find that the chances for progress are limited. In such rural settings, female workers also have domestic responsibilities to fulfil, which increases their workloads, thus affecting their health and productivity. There is little community response and corporate concern over these issues (Ram-Bidesi and Mitchell 2005). Women who cannot maintain the required levels of performance are simply seen as lazy and incompetent.

In rural societies where educational levels are low, people still consider that the primary responsibility of women is to maintain the household even if they are in full-time employment. Changing this stereotype and giving adequate recognition to women's work still remains a challenge.

Loss of self-reliant strategies

While women are the major labor force within shore-based industrial fish processing, they also play a crucial role in subsistence fisheries by facilitating household food and nutritional security in the Pacific Islands (Matthews 1995). Based on the level of household needs, women have carefully switched between formal and informal activities. However, the influence of market opportunities is now affecting this delicate balance between meeting subsistence needs and generating cash. The increased demand for marine products and greater accessibility to urban markets has led to the desire to increase cash incomes. Women try to sell their products and use cash instead to purchase cheaper but nutritionally inferior foods. The artisanal commercial activities they engage in increasingly target export markets with non-edible products such as aquarium fish, shells, coral and non-edible seaweeds. This diverts fishers' dependence towards more cash-based economic production and therefore reduces their reliance or time available for subsistence activities. While this may improve their economic independence in the short term, it also creates greater risk of losing their self-reliant food production strategies and traditional knowledge associated with such strategies. Increased consumption of canned foods, processed starch and sugars has also resulted in increase cases of communicable diseases in Pacific Island countries.

Moreover, the biological and ecological characteristics and resource status of most of these new fisher-

ies is not adequately known. In the event of over-exploitation and collapse of such fisheries, women would be left with few resources and traditional skills to support their future livelihoods.

Careful management measures that include women as important stakeholders are required for such market-oriented commodities for their exports to remain viable and sustainable in the long term (Ram-Bidesi et al. 2003).

Overexploitation and degradation of coastal areas

A number of case studies show that easily accessible areas that are in close proximity to villages are overexploited because of increased fishing pressure, generally by women and children (see Novaczek et al. 2005). Often, women's fishing activities are considered informal and, therefore, insignificant but with increased demand for food and income, such areas become vulnerable to increased fishing activities. The situation is further exacerbated with the impact of other coastal development activities that either compete within the same coastal space or cause destruction to fish habitats.

Because women's fishing activities are seen as marginal, women and children are rarely targeted as key players to implement resource management and conservation activities. The economic underestimation of women's contribution to household food and nutrition leaves them without a voice in coastal development projects, and so consequently they receive little or no compensation.

To deal with localized areas of overexploitation, women must sometimes travel farther away in search for more productive fishing grounds. This not only imposes additional fishing costs but also leaves women with less time to do household chores and attend to other social responsibilities. In addition, it extends women's working hours by further putting pressure on their physical health.

The catch in community-based resource management systems

The recognition of the relative effectiveness of community-based fisheries management systems, as opposed to centrally managed fisheries, is widely accepted in many developing countries. For example, community members are able to exclude outsiders from using their fishing grounds, thereby limiting open access to fisheries. There is an increased effort on reviving traditional customs, values and beliefs to guide resource use and management practices. As this community-based resource management approach gathers momentum and community rules and regulations are further articu-

lated, one should not lose sight that traditional regulations and practices may often deprive representation of women and their active involvement in decision-making processes. In community hierarchical structures, elderly males such as village chiefs or headmen often make crucial decisions on behalf of their people with the view that the decisions are in the best interest of the community at large. However, these decisions may fall short of integrating factors that may affect women's fishing activities or their access to resources. Coastal tourism projects provide a good case of such attitudes. Village decision-making is often a male dominated process in Fiji where men gather over a *kava* bowl to discuss community development activities, such as whether to allow resort or infrastructure development and the level of compensation and/or royalties. In the process, women are not adequately consulted or the informal nature of their fisheries gets inadequately assessed in terms of determining the impact that a new development may have on them.

Because men and women often have different roles and responsibilities in their households and communities, their knowledge and perceptions on resources use and management are not necessarily the same. In the case of resource management decisions, by not including women, it is likely that decisions will poorly understand by them or that women may have less incentive to follow the decisions. This can eventually lead to the failure of management decisions.

It is important that community projects, whether they are development or conservation focused, are thoroughly assessed and evaluated using a gender sensitive feasibility analysis to ensure that women's views are integrated into project formulation and implementation.

As the demand for fisheries resources increase and are accompanied by improvements in fishing technologies, there is considerable pressure to implement rights-based fisheries systems to achieve long-term sustainability of resources. Pacific Islands societies are predominantly patrilineal, with males as heads of households. It is likely that despite women's active involvement in fishing activities, their entitlements to fishing rights and quotas will be limited, thus restricting their access to fully participate in fishing and aquaculture.

The inclusion of women in determining the type and nature of fishing rights (such as in formulation of any allocation criteria) is important in order to integrate women's interest and their views. Furthermore, responsible fisheries can only be achieved if all stakeholders participate and follow the given guidelines.

Action for change

For the maritime regions of the Pacific, while the marine resources provide an important economic potential and place the islands in a strategic position with regards to their fisheries resources, they also pose several threats. Overexploitation and unsustainable resource use can lead to a major collapse of fisheries, leaving little alternative resources of a similar scale as a fall back. Realizing the development potential and sustainable management options are important for all Pacific Island communities, including women who depend on these resources.

The globalization of the fishing industry and the liberalization of international trade means new challenges for Pacific Island women. To understand these challenges and the means to overcome them will require more detailed research, gender advocacy and an active role by women at higher levels of policy decision-making.

A number of NGOs and women's groups are actively working on women's issues but are primarily focussed on meeting women's basic and immediate needs. They do not have the resources and capabilities to deal with sector-specific, medium-to long-term policy issues. Where women are able to mobilize to coordinate their perspectives, they often face institutional hurdles such as a lack of any effective mechanism to influence high-level policy decisions. Women are not represented at any of the higher-level decision making bodies in the fisheries sector. There is no coordinated effort and as individual groups, women's voices are not heard. Change is needed not only to mainstream gender issues but also to ensure that fisheries policies are sound and rational and that they accommodate the interest of the wider Pacific Island communities.

Way forward

In order to address some of the critical issues highlighted, it is important that Pacific women's groups cooperate and coordinate their activities in order to have a stronger and united voice to influence higher levels of policy within the fisheries sector. NGO groups such as the Women and Fisheries Network (consisting of researchers, academics and students) could focus on research and technical aspects of the fisheries sector, while the recently established NGO group Pacific Women in Maritime Association (PacWIMA), which consists of female activists, industry managers, policy makers and fish workers, could promote the advancement of women's rights and interests in the maritime sector through their varied roles and representation. They could also play an important role in raising awareness and influencing policy decisions in their own right as individuals and as a group.

Representation at the Forum Fisheries Committee (the regional decision-making body on tuna and offshore fisheries) and the Heads of Fisheries Meeting of the Secretariat for the Pacific Community (regional decision making body on coastal fisheries) must be sought for a greater impact on gender issues in regional fisheries policy decisions. If women's groups are more coordinated into a partnership arrangement or a coalition, it may be easier to influence decision-making at this higher level.

One of their early tasks will be to formulate a regional action plan that looks into minimizing risks related to the sex trade associated with fishing vessel activities. This could also include a Code of Practice for vessel crew and operators as part of the conditions for fishing access agreements that are concluded by the regional island governments. In the context of coastal fisheries, ensuring that women's interests (e.g. their access to fishing grounds and fish resources) are incorporated in any allocation of fishing rights or that they are adequately compensated for any losses related to other coastal activities.

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