

Women's fishing

Women in fisheries in Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea: Past initiatives, present situation and future possibilities

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Introduction

Milne Bay Province (MBP) lies at the far eastern tip of Papua New Guinea (PNG). The province's 600 islands, atolls and reefs lie within a maritime area of approximately 110,000 km² (Omeri 1991). The majority of the province's approximately 210,000 inhabitants live near the shore, both on the islands and the mainland. The communities are culturally similar, and are predominantly matrilineal (i.e. clan membership, territorial rights, and inheritance are determined through the female line). Inhabitants are mostly subsistence and artisanal fishers, many of whom sell marine resources to exporters and rely on fishing, trade and subsistence agriculture for their food security and livelihoods. Average annual income per household has been estimated at USD 130.00 (Kinch 2001; Mitchell et al. 2001).

Worldwide, women contribute in multiple ways to the production, processing, marketing and management of fish and other marine resources. Studies from PNG show that women's fishing supplies an estimated 20 to 50 per cent of catches annually in some regions (Haines 1979, 1982); studies elsewhere in the Pacific substantiate this productivity (Rawlinson, et al. 1995).

Across the Pacific, women concentrate their fishing activities on the collection of small fish, molluscs and invertebrates in lagoons, the inter-tidal zone and inshore areas (Chapman 1987). Women in MBP, particularly in the Trobriand Islands and the south coast of mainland Milne Bay, especially harvest invertebrates such as mud crabs. More recently, women have entered the lucrative beche-de-mer (processed sea cucumber) fishery as harvesters and as scouts for male divers (Kinch 2002). MBP

women generally reef glean by walking along reef flats at low tide, collecting invertebrates, small fish, and very occasionally seaweed (Kinch 1999, 2003; Yamelu 1984).

Status of women

Traditionally, women have enjoyed a relatively high status in MBP, and are central to land ownership and food production for the living and the dead (mortuary feasts are the most important rituals Milne Bay societies). Colonial administrative officers have noted the social standing and sailing prowess of women in MBP:

A noteworthy sociological feature of the seagoing inhabitants of the Calvados Chain, is the status of women in political, social, and economic life. They exercise considerable influence in all questions for discussion — nor is this influence confined to the bedchamber brand of politics. They have no hesitation in airing their views on all subjects in no uncertain terms. They carry out all the indigenous economic activities that the men do, and it can be said that they do them almost as well. They are often seen sailing over the lagoons of the Archipelago, manning large ocean going canoes from which they fish for trochus, turtles, shell and other forms of seafood and produce (Teague 1956:3).

Today, women still have a relatively prominent role in village affairs. Women's groups, particularly church-led women's fellowships and clubs continue to be an active part of every community.

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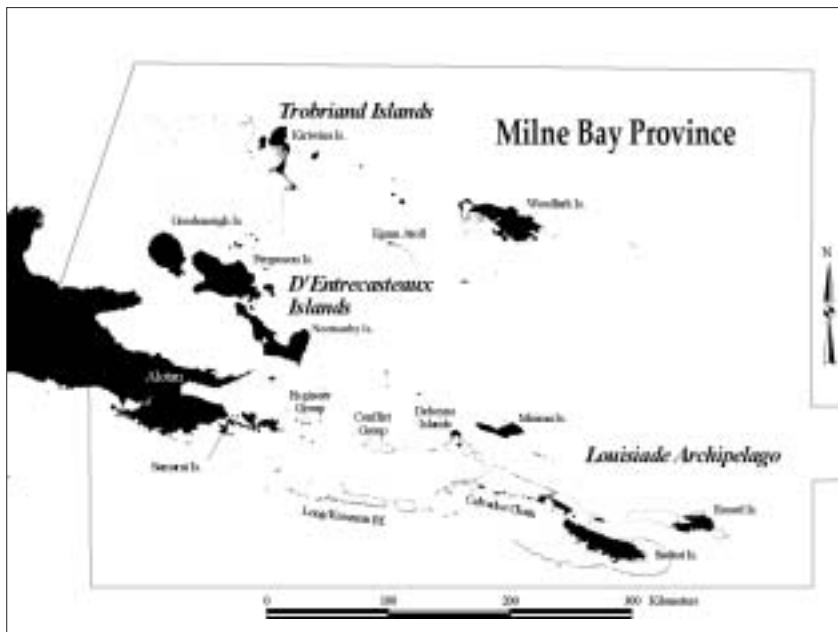


Figure 1. Milne Bay Province

Unfortunately, due to the influence of the cash economy, women's position is being usurped through changing values and a breakdown of traditional social structures. The increasing use of money in mortuary feasting has had a significant impact on women's status because women's contribution of locally grown food, particularly yams, has been overshadowed by the use of money to buy trade store food (Kinch 2001; Byford 2000a). The increase in cash from the sale of beche-de-mer has also meant the exclusion of women from decisions made about its use (Kinch et al. 2002).

Division of labour and fishing effort

As across most of Melanesia, men in MBP typically do tasks that require strength and sustained exertion, such as felling trees, building houses, cutting gardens, netting fish, sailing canoes and general maintenance. They also do all butchering of pigs and turtles. Tasks performed by women are those associated with nurture, including planting, weeding and harvesting of gardens, cooking, making mats, baskets and clay pots, raising and feeding children and livestock. Women can also be seen sailing canoes, diving and fishing. Although there is a division of labour by gender (e.g. men catch most fish, and women and children focus more on shellfish and inshore fisheries), MacIntyre (1983) noted that this is more pronounced in ideology than in actual practice.

A fishing effort study in Milne Bay coastal villages in the late 1970s reported that men spent 3.1 hours

per week fishing and that this represented 17 per cent of their productive work time (Bayliss-Smith cited in Pernetta and Hill 1980). From my own observations, I suggest this is an underestimation. In the Nuakata Fisheries survey conducted by Conservation International (CI) and the Milne Bay Provincial Fisheries Division in 2000, 76 households out of 100 were surveyed on Nuakata Island. Eleven per cent of the households surveyed said they fished daily, and 96 per cent said they had fished within the last three days (Kinch and Kelokelo 2000). On Tubetube, MacIntyre (1983) noted that people regularly fished three to four times a week

and fish was eaten on most days. Another study at East Cape in the late 1980s (part of the Commonwealth Secretariat's program, see below) showed fishing accounted for 24.1 per cent of all men's work time, compared with 9.0 per cent for women. As would be expected, given that selling is predominately a women's profession, men spent only 0.2 per cent of all work time selling fish compared with 2.1 per cent for women. Men also contributed only 9.9 per cent of all work time to domestic duties compared with 40.2 per cent for women (Hunting-Fishtech 1990).

Past initiatives

During 1989 and 1990, the Commonwealth Secretariat organized several studies on the role of women in fisheries. These were undertaken with assistance from the then called South Pacific Commission (SPC) and the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC) (Schoeffel and Talagi 1989). These studies recommended that development programs involving women should focus on building skills and providing training in post-harvest techniques to enhance the income earning capacity of women. One study concluded that the subsistence catch was much higher than present assumptions, and that increased production was possible with an expansion of the market. It was thought that women's lack of access to markets and the lack of movement in the market were the main factors limiting women's development. Linked to this was the lack of post-harvest technology and skills transfer (Hunting-Fishtech 1990).

In 1993, the PNG Department of Fisheries and Marine Resources (DFMR) and the Department of Human Affairs and Youth (DHAY) signed an MOU for the establishment of the PNG Women in Fisheries Project. Under this agreement, DFMR was responsible for providing technical, financial and administrative support to women's groups through workshops on fish processing, marketing, distribution and small-business development. They were tasked with purchasing and distributing fish processing equipment to women's groups and providing assistance in marketing fish products. DHAY was responsible for awareness campaigns, organizing and co-coordinating training workshops for small-scale processing and marketing, and identifying promoters to start small scale processing and marketing projects. Problems arose in the delivery of this project because DFMR had trouble running what was essentially a technical fisheries project as well as a women's project. Opposition was also generated from women in the field who expected a project involving women to go through DHAY, while DHAY also believed they should control and implement the project. The project was eventually moved to DHAY, where it was later terminated due to lack of staff and resources (Lambeth et al. 2002).

The present situation

The main seafood processor in MBP is Nako Fisheries Limited, situated on the waterfront at Sanderson Bay in Alotau. Nako Fisheries began in 1994 in the wake of the failure of the Milne Bay Fishing Authority (MBFA) and is now the largest fishing company in MBP. In 1998 the company continued with a capital development program aimed

at upgrading standards and operating capabilities. These developments included improvements to the Nako fish processing factory and office, an extensive new slipway, and further equipment for the marine workshop. Its aim is to establish itself as a broad-based, privately owned, fishing enterprise.

Nako purchases fish and crayfish from fishers by sending out fishing boats to coastal and island communities. The fish are packed in ice, and brought back to the central fish-processing shed in Alotau where they are filleted by women who are trained processors (Anon. 2002). Previously, Nako exported giant clam adductor muscle, trawled for prawns and longlined for yellowfin tuna. Nako shares an aircraft with the courier service, DHL, and exports crayfish, crabs and prawns directly to Cairns, Australia. Ninety per cent of the filleted fish it processes is sold within PNG, mainly to a large company that provides catering services to mining companies and other large institutions.

Nako has trained several women in occupations usually reserved for men such as engineers and shipwrights, with some receiving training in Townsville, Australia. One woman was recently accepted as the first female engineer at the Maritime College in Madang (Anon. 2002).

The main option for fish marketing in MBP is through the district markets. Currently, most pub-

Women at the Alotau market selling fish, lobsters and juvenile hawksbill turtles. Photos: Jeff Kinch



lic markets in MBP are inadequate and require upgrading as there is little or no provision for the use of ice or refrigeration, for protected displays, for access to potable water, or for any training in elementary hygiene. There are current plans to construct a new market places for Alotau, which will incorporate some of these issues.

Future possibilities

Fisheries departments throughout the Pacific region are concerned with downturns in nearshore marine resources, and the subsequent effects of overharvesting and habitat loss. One of the most common solutions is to encourage the use of offshore resources where men receive gear, training, and advice on how to move their fishing activities offshore to take the strain off the heavily utilized inshore coastal resources. Women, however, receive little or none of the benefits of these programs (Matthews 2002).

Three large multi-lateral projects have been initiated in MBP: two looking at fisheries development and one assisting with sustainable fisheries. The Asian Development Bank's (ADB) Community-based Fisheries Development and Management Program and the EU's Rural Coastal Fisheries Development Program have subcomponents that allow for women's skills-training. These training programs will help women identify and respond to potential opportunities and will focus on fish quality, marketing, value-added processing and business management. Economic opportunities directed at women will be spread among a number of areas, including social infrastructure developments such as wharves, jetties and facilities that will provide secure accommodation and proper sanitation. Value-added fish processing and marketing will also enable women to respond to these opportunities. These two programs also plan to establish consultative mechanisms whereby formal associations, including women's groups, have a greater involvement in making fisheries development and management decisions.

Women who work in seafood processing plants such as Nako are usually single women because the factory working requirements are usually incompatible with the responsibilities of a woman with a family. The ADB and EU programs both recognize this and plan to conduct awareness programmes on HIV/AIDS.

Conservation International has been contracted by the United Nations Development Program to execute the Milne Bay Community-based Coastal and Marine Conservation Program (CMCP). The CMCP constitutes the first large-scale marine con-

servation and resource management initiative in PNG and is intended to be a 10-year programme assisting many coastal and island communities in village-based marine resource management and conservation activities aimed at the betterment of their livelihoods. As women are also marine exploiters, the CMCP will involve women's groups. CMCP is currently investigating alternative income streams that will focus on food production and quality, and improving the nutritional status of the family.

Finally, there are plans by the Milne Bay Provincial Administration to establish District Women's Boards and Area Associations to support the PCW and to redesign the existing women's credit scheme in consultation with Provincial Division of Commerce and Industry.

Gender equity and other issues

The overriding aim for previous policies on women in PNG has been the increased participation by women, both as beneficiaries and agents in the development process, and improvement in the quality of life for all. Turara (1995, cited in Quinn and Davis 1997) suggests that a lack of analytical, gender-specific information has worked to inhibit development opportunities for women in the fisheries sector, and this has resulted in economic planners not viewing women as stakeholders. Part of the reason for this is that much of the work done by women is not remunerated or is poorly remunerated and therefore little valued in financial terms (Williams 2002). The emphasis placed by donors and governments on commercial fisheries development, especially offshore fishing where women have virtually no involvement, has also contributed to the lack of recognition and support of women's role in fisheries (Matthews 2002).

Gender analysis highlights the different roles and behavior of men and women in production, reproduction and management. Research on women and gender in fisheries requires more rigorous methodological and analytical tools, many of which are being developed or already exist in mainstream gender analysis. This is necessary for successful program development involving women because gender-specific programs have not succeeded in PNG.

Reasons for this failure include problems over which department should take the lead. Having specific women in fisheries programs can reinforce the tendency of national fisheries agencies to separate women's issues from fisheries issues. Issues relating to women tend to get offloaded onto the

women in fisheries program, or onto women's agencies that have no experience, resources or expertise in fisheries (Lambeth et al. 2002). In the future, more attention must be given in projects to women in fisheries development activities, which can be done through approaches such as supporting the "family and development", by promoting equal opportunities for women through the fisheries sector (Williams 2002).

Conclusion

Although women's involvement in harvesting, processing and marketing are increasingly acknowledged and studied, women are still poorly represented in national fisheries agencies, fisheries training courses and fisheries meetings; and are often not included in fisheries development and management planning processes (Lambeth et al. 2002).

Because women contribute a significant portion to the overall marine resources caught, any attempt to develop long-term sustainable fisheries will require women's participation (see Bidesi 1994). Multi-lateral programs such as the ADB, EU and CI should assess gender issues at the planning, implementation and monitoring stages of projects, which will result in an increasing awareness of women's involvement in fisheries. More information on subsistence fisheries production, consumption and environmental impact is needed, with the analysis of the differing activities and contributions of men and women. This sex disaggregated data can then be used for determining the gender impact of project activities.

Impacts, both positive and negative, can be different for men and women. For example, women are more likely than men to spend their wages on children and family (Lambeth et al. 2002), while money earned by men is disproportionately spent on tobacco and alcohol, which adds to health and social problems. Already, malnutrition among women in MBP is due to an inadequate intake of energy and protein foods; it is common for women to eat after men, and to eat less (Kinch 1999, 2001; Byford 2000b). The social outcome of women becoming wage earners is not always ideal because they are often expected to maintain their traditional gender roles within the home and community. There is a need, however, to allow women access to the means for their improvement, including access to capital, equipment, technology, transport, credit, training, employment and education as full and equitable participation of women in fisheries will ultimately help improve health, nutrition and literacy standards, motivate savings, and can provide incentive for the family unit.

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