

## Women's changing participation in the fisheries sector in Pacific Island countries

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While many aspects of women's fishing participation in Pacific Island countries have changed, their traditional and social roles have largely remained the same. Women's increased participation in the market economy, paid employment and other such activities is in addition to their existing traditional and social roles.

In some cases, the involvement of women in the fisheries sector is undermined and under-reported because their fishing activities are viewed as an extension of their traditional role of food foraging for home consumption. Men have to some extent also started to change their roles, helping out with household chores, but the basic perceptions of women being responsible for domestic chores and food gathering persist and will take time to change. There has been continued debate on the merits of singling out women in fisheries management and development work, with the argument that men and communities in general do not always support 'women only' projects and initiatives.

Although the fisheries sector offers excellent opportunities for future economic benefits in Pacific Island countries, maximising these opportunities is a challenge that communities continue to grapple with. Women fishers especially dominate the inshore and subsistence fisheries in many countries of the region, but are usually minimally involved in training and decision-making relating to fisheries development and management. Decreasing catches, the loss of certain inshore species, the development of coastal fisheries areas for non-fishing users and tourism, general land reclamation and industrial development directly impact on women's fishing activities. This is partly because development activities tend to be within women's fishing areas and thus cut off access to fishing grounds, and partly because the new ventures or uses usually do not include women. As a consequence, women travel further to fish and must look for transportation to distant reefs or engage in alternative means of ensuring their livelihoods.

In many Pacific Island countries, assets and ownership of boats and fishing gear are associated with

men, even in cases where women are the main fishers or income earners in the family. This is more true in patrilineal societies where land and marine tenure and ownership of homes, boats and other amenities are associated with men. Because women usually do not own the boats needed for transportation to outer reefs, any extra fuel costs directly affect them and their fishing participation because they have to pay fares to get to these reefs. In some cases fish and other products are given as payment. This is a hardship faced by women fishers in many coastal rural communities.

Traditional institutions, protocols and beliefs are slowly changing, with modifications to the structures, leadership and dynamics that influence decision-making at the community level. The argument that traditions and customary regulations are major hindrances to women's involvement, although true, has also slowly weakened, with educated women and those with economic standing or respected employment status establishing new codes of conduct and systems of interaction in island communities. These women become agents of change in their communities and represent women's grievances at village forums. Their views and interventions are usually seriously considered by elders and other sectors of communities.

On the other hand, in some communities, like those in the rural coastal areas of the Solomon Islands and Fiji, traditional barriers remain. For example, women not only fish but are also expected in many cases to gather root crops from the gardens. In some areas of the Solomon Islands women have to paddle long distances in canoes to fetch food from the gardens. Other women walk long distances carrying heavy sacks of root crops and coconuts on their backs, but because these are accepted traditional roles, not much notice is taken of the women or of the activities. There are taboo areas and periods when women cannot go fishing, and the belief that menstruating women are unclean and must not take part in fishing is still strictly observed in certain areas of the Solomon Islands. In these cases, some women accept their roles and positions in society because of the con-

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cept of bride price, where the perception is that since their husbands have paid a price for them it is their marital duty to do the food gathering and fishing. Food gathering for these women is an almost daily activity, with women of all ages out in the gardens or on the reefs. In some areas of the Solomon Islands, women are the predominant fishers of the mangrove areas, where crocodiles are a real threat. Even with increased crocodile sightings, women continue to frequent mangrove areas foraging for food.

In Fiji, women in some rural coastal areas also undertake gardening and fishing activities as part of the traditional roles of food foraging. In some Fijian rural villages, women still exchange crabs and other marine products for money or food, usually depending on the buyer to set prices. In cases where middle sellers buy from communities, prices are set by the buyers and in most cases women have little knowledge of the market; thus, products are sold at very low prices. Exchanging mats, baskets and tapa for modern household amenities such as curtains, blankets, mosquito nets, plates and pots is in some cases the only means of accessing consumer goods that these women have. They make arrangements among themselves and after a period of 4–6 months of preparation on both sides the goods are exchanged. These transactions usually take place between women in urban areas and isolated rural areas.

From the above discussion, it can be assumed that there still exists a wide gulf between women in urban and peri-urban areas and those in rural coastal locations regarding work undertaken, traditional obligations, and fishing participation. The differences in level of education and marine awareness and the lack of opportunities or infrastructure to support marketing, education and skills training widen this gap even further.

At the other extreme, in Tokelau and Niue women's fishing participation is more a pastime or leisure activity. These countries enjoy a higher per capita income and more Western lifestyle because of their association with New Zealand. Women in these countries almost all have access to income and education and men are the main fishers and food gatherers.

In Samoa women are not as involved in fishing as women in Fiji, but there is intensive participation in certain invertebrate fisheries. Samoan women target the sea cucumber fishery, collecting several species of sea cucumber, cutting them open and taking out the guts to be eaten raw. The guts of certain sea cucumber species are mixed with other species, which are scraped and the skin chopped into fine pieces. This mixture is put into empty soft drink bottles and sold at markets and other distri-

bution outlets throughout Samoa. It is a popular delicacy and is ordered by relatives visiting from overseas countries, for special village functions and for everyday eating.

In Kiribati and Tuvalu, women are mainly gleaners while men are fishers. Women are regularly out in the near-shore areas gleaned and netting for small reef fish. Most fishing in Kiribati is from canoes and this is mostly done by men.

The lesser participation of women in fishing in Samoa, Niue and Tokelau has various explanations; one of them is the protective nature of the men towards their women, with the men not wanting the women out in the sun or undertaking any strenuous tasks. In Niue and Tokelau it could also be due to the fact that economics is not the driving factor for fishing.

In general, women in the Melanesian countries of Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are the most involved in fishing. Tradition highly influences fishing participation of women, thus the variations in participation in the countries of the region. Women's fishing participation may seem unchanged and minimal in some cases, but the roles they play significantly affect food security and the future of children in the Pacific.

Women dominate seafood selling and marketing activities in nearly all countries of the Pacific. These activities range from selling at the market, on the roadside, to middle sellers, house to house, to restaurants and to exporters. These women are in most cases selling not only what they catch but what all members of their family catch. In Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Solomon Islands women are hired by middle sellers to sell their products for them. In most cases there is little infrastructure to support these activities and women sit in the hot sun for whole days trying to sell products. Because of a lack of appropriate storage facilities, fish and other products can go bad and prices can fluctuate widely, sometimes resulting in small earnings.

Most selling in municipal markets is on a small scale with no capital support. Selling, bargaining, budgeting and negotiating skills are learnt on the job by women. Although most of them sell at the major markets in all the main towns and cities of the Pacific, they have little idea of the dynamics of the towns as they are usually confined to their marketing space and to small supermarkets where they purchase goods before returning home. Their exposure is therefore confined to the areas around the market, the immediate shopping area and the bus station. These women have over time secured their own networks and groups that help each other in selling and securing buyers for their products.

In general, fishing participation by women takes many forms, ranging from preparation of fishing gear to involvement in fishing, harvesting, processing or distribution activities, especially marketing. The continuing classification of women as food foragers for family consumption with no economic value given to these other activities undermines women's participation and translates to the continuing neglect of women in mainstream development initiatives, education and training. Because their selling activities are usually confined to municipal markets and small-scale buyers, there is little focus on their involvement in the market economy despite the fact that these regular marketing and selling activities in most cases provide families' financial and social livelihoods.

In community settings, women are expected to provide food for visitors, special functions and traditional obligations. There is no financial accounting of the time taken for fishing, preparation, waiting on visitors, and so on. As explained earlier, most of this involvement of women is explained as an extension of their domestic role of providing food for the family.

When discussing women fishers in Pacific Island countries, the emphasis is not so much on equity or equality or the need for gender-balanced work, but rather on the recognition that the fisheries sector is where most women entrepreneurs and home supporters are. These women run the day-to-day financial and social affairs of their families with little acknowledgement or assistance.

The concern is how these masses of women can be included in mainstream development. It means looking at ways of opening up technology barriers, market barriers, education barriers and opportunity barriers, among many others. The challenge is how women can have access to markets and training in marketing, quality handling, budgeting, credit facilities and general nutrition, as well as how they can purchase and own assets that facilitate entering into business ventures – things that could make a difference not only to their own progress but the progress of their families. The bigger challenge is how to translate policies into tangible or meaningful actions that will uplift women's lives.

Women in Pacific Island countries continue to live within traditionally defined settings while at the same time being expected to deal with the modern market economy through their marketing activities. The credit facilities available, development ventures and training provided are foreign and have little meaning for their livelihoods. The missing link in this case is how to get information and

opportunities out to the women. Traditional and social barriers that have been one of the biggest hindrances to women's full participation in fisheries development are starting to break down, but linking women to available development resources and information is still a challenge. Women are moving into male-dominated and newer areas of work and into emerging fisheries. The market does not differentiate between men and women regarding production; it judges the quality of what is produced. This is an area that should be actively exploited and strategically addressed to ensure that women are involved in the private and informal sectors.

In spite of the advances in technology and communication and the widespread availability of information, how to make this information and these opportunities and networks available to our people in rural areas, especially women and youth, is a continuing challenge. At the regional level, networking and advances in regional approaches to fisheries and other sectors have progressed rapidly. This begs the question of how the same sort of networking and collaboration can be achieved at the national and community level, and if these types of networking and collective approaches can in the long run benefit women, or change the way women's issues are currently addressed.

The question that needs to be asked is whether the challenge is to have equality and equity in numbers for women using various indicators, or to empower women in rural coastal communities to make decisions and to be included in development and management initiatives. The overemphasis on women in leadership and decision-making could draw attention away from the urgent need to lift the general standard of living of women out there in rural coastal communities.

The needs in these two cases differ enormously. At the decision-making level, there is a need for political willingness to open doors to women in spite of ingrained institutional barriers. Campaigning, education and training are needed to enable women to come up to speed on discussions and issues so they can be meaningfully engaged.

At the community level, the need is more about taking women out of poverty, putting in place measures that directly impact on the work areas and responsibilities of women, and assisting women to tap into the resources and opportunities that are out there. For many women it is not lack of income or food that is the biggest problem; it is the lack of opportunities to be able to carve a future for themselves and their children.