

Oceania/ Pacific Islands**Women's Changing Participation**

In the Pacific Island countries, women's participation in fishing is increasingly the mainstay of their families but remains generally undervalued and unrecognized

This piece by Aliti Vunisea is a condensed version of the article that originally appeared in the *Women in Fisheries Information Bulletin*, Issue 16, March 2007 (<http://www.spc.int/coastfish/news/WIF/WIF16/index.htm>)

Among fishing communities in Pacific Island countries, women's increasing participation in the market economy is in addition to their traditional and social roles. The involvement of women in the fisheries sector is sometimes under-reported because their fishing activities are viewed as an extension of their traditional role of food foraging for home consumption.

Although fisheries in Pacific Island countries offer excellent potential, there are many challenges. Women fishers dominate the inshore and subsistence fisheries in many parts, but have limited access to training and decision-making opportunities.

Decreasing catches, the loss of certain inshore species, the development of coastal fisheries areas for non-fishing uses and tourism, general land reclamation and industrial development, have direct impacts on



women's fishing activities. As a consequence, women have to travel farther to fish, search for transportation to distant reefs, or seek alternative sources of livelihoods.

In many Pacific Island countries, even where women are the main income earners, assets such as boats and fishing gear are owned by men, particularly in patrilineal societies. Since women usually do not own the boats needed for transportation to outer reefs, fuel price hikes directly affect them, increasing their overall indebtedness.

Traditional institutions, protocols and beliefs are, however, slowly changing. Women who have achieved a measure of educational and economic success have somewhat changed the codes of conduct and systems of interaction in island communities. These women have become the change agents, representing women's grievances at village forums.

However, in some communities, like those in the rural coastal areas of the Solomon Islands and Fiji, women's productive work remains unrecognized and faces traditional barriers. For example, women not only fish but also gather root crops. They have to paddle long distances in canoes to fetch food or walk long distances carrying heavy sacks of root crops and coconuts on their backs. There are taboo periods, such as during menstruation, when women cannot go fishing.

The concept of 'bride price' conditions women to believe that since their husbands have paid a price for them, it is their duty to do the food gathering and fishing. In some areas of the Solomon Islands, women are the predominant fishers in the mangrove areas, where crocodiles, sighted frequently, are a real threat.

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 exchange crabs and other marine products for money or food. In cases where

middlepersons buy from communities, prices are set by the buyers, and as women have little knowledge of the market, products are often 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, their only means of accessing consumer goods. These transactions between women in rural and urban areas are often mediated by unequal conditions of power and privilege.

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

In Samoa, women are less involved in fishing but actively participate in certain invertebrate fisheries. Samoan women target the sea cucumber fishery, collecting, cutting and gutting several species of sea cucumber. The guts are used in popular dishes.

In Kiribati and Tuvalu, women are mainly gleaners, while men are the fishers. Women are regularly out in the nearshore areas gleaning and netting small reef fish. Most fishing in Kiribati is from canoes and is mostly done by men.

In general, women in the Melanesian countries of Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are involved in fishing. Tradition highly influences the participation of women in the sector, and there is thus regional variation. 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, selling at the market, on the roadside, to middlepersons,

house-to-house, to restaurants and to exporters. In most cases, women sit under the hot sun all day, trying to sell their highly perishable products. Selling in municipal markets is on a small scale, with no capital support. Women learn selling skills on the job. Their exposure is confined to the local market. However, over time, women have formed informal self-help groups to aid their selling.

Although women's work in fishing may be the primary income earner and takes many forms, from preparation of fishing gear to involvement in fishing, harvesting, processing or distribution activities, especially marketing, these activities are economically undervalued, and women are neglected in mainstream development initiatives, education and training. The significant point is that the fisheries sector is where most women entrepreneurs and home supporters are. These women run their families with little acknowledgement or assistance.

If they are to be included in mainstream development, existing barriers of technology, market, education, opportunity and so on, must be removed. Access to markets, and training in marketing, quality handling, budgeting, credit facilities, nutrition and entrepreneurship are needed. The bigger challenge is how to translate policies into meaningful actions that will benefit women. Linking women to available development resources and information in newly-emerging private and informal sectors is also a challenge.

Using the advances in information and communication technologies to benefit people in rural areas, especially women and youth, is an urgent need. At the regional level, networking and advances in regional approaches to fisheries have progressed rapidly. How can the same sort of networking and collaboration be achieved at the national and community level to benefit women? And which is needed—the equitable representation of women or the empowerment of rural coastal women? The overemphasis on women in leadership and decision-making could draw attention away from the urgent

need to lift the standard of living of women 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 institutional barriers. Campaigning, education and training are needed to empower, and engage with, them.

At the community level, the need is to take women out of poverty; to put in place measures that will have direct impacts on the work areas and responsibilities of women, and help them tap existing opportunities. For many women, it is not the 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.

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