

Not just home-makers

Fishing is an important, though sometimes neglected activity for women in Fiji

For the women of Fiji, as with their sisters in much of the rest of the world, looking after homes and children is just one among several responsibilities. Their working lives have traditionally been given over to handicrafts, community development and, most importantly, fishing.

Fiji has a coastline of over 5,000 km. and the total fish production in 1991 was 33,000 tonnes. The fisheries comprise mainly three sub-sectors: subsistence, artisanal and industrial.

Fiji is still a net importer of fish products. In 1991, for example, while it exported fish products amounting to 8,320 tonnes, the gross imports amounted to about 13,050 tonnes, comprising mainly mackerel and pilchard for domestic consumption and albacore for processing at the Pacific Fishing Company (PAFCO).

While the fishery is mainly classified into artisanal, subsistence and industrial, the fisher folk themselves are classified into artisanal, semi-commercial, commercial and industrial.

The women of Ra District of the Western Division of Fiji are typical of this nation of islands. Here fishing is the second most important source of income, after sugar-cane processing. Ra District has its own sugar mill which supplies the sugar for the nation.

The fishing villages are close to one another. Yet neither the fish resources nor fishing seasons and gear are similar, even for villages separated by a mere two kilometres.

The Fiji government's Department of Fisheries issues licences to fish and permits to sell. These are meant to regulate

only the commercial fishery. No permits or licences are needed to fish for domestic consumption.

Fiji's Department of Fisheries is believed to be the best managed in the whole of the South Pacific. According to the Director, it is the third largest earner of revenue for the Government, after the Customs and Inland Revenue departments.

The Department follows the principle of self-reliance and is against dependence on external aid agencies. It also discourages subsidies, as far as possible. Instead, it encourages individual enterprises.

For commercial fishing, licences are given only to those women who own an outboard motor and adequate fishing gear. Most women in Ra District have permits. Only a few have fishing licences.

In the north of Veti Levu, at a place called Rakiraci, a large number of women participate actively in fisheries, especially in diving for trochus. Soqosoqo Vakarama, a women's association under the Ministry of Women and Culture, has field programmes with these fisherwomen.

Two kinds of boats

Women fish almost on all days, and operate both inboards and outboard motors in Rakiraki. Two kinds of boats are used: the 28-footer and the 16-footer.

The former can carry about 10-12 women and the latter six to eight. With a 24-horsepower outboard motor, the boat takes close to an hour to reach the fishing ground, which is often on the seaward side of the reef.

These women are relatives of either the reef owners or the chief. Diving is

normally done from 9.30 pm to 3 am. One night's diving fetches about F\$ 300. While diving takes place on alternate days, fishing occurs on all days except the Sabbath. Women's participation in activities related to fisheries also extend to making nylon nets, traps, and smoking fish.

In a week, the women give the village organisation the value of two days' catch. They retain one day's catch value for education and development of the village through activities like sanitation, construction of jetties and community halls. These women belong to the 19-50 years age group. Most of the divers are older women.

Although women and men fish together at times, most often they fish separately. On Saturdays, fishing is undertaken only for the family. The divers' occupational hazards include deafness and joint pains.

According to Sereana Saukalou, the Coordinator of the Women's Association in Rakiraki, fishing is lighter work than collecting firewood and tending the garden. It is much more arduous to carry a basket of root crops, she says, than to dive for fish and collect them in the boat. In cleaning fish, other family members do help, unlike in cleaning and cooking root crops. The Ra fisherwomen preserve the fish by one of several methods: smoking, drying in the sun, boiling in deep-sea

water or, for overnight preservation, by frying. Deep freezes come in handy where electricity is available.

The fisherwomen sell their catches in towns and villages. From here middlemen buy the fish to sell in other towns and cities. There are also export dealers who buy fish, seashells, pearls and lobsters for the overseas markets of the United States, Australia, Korea, Japan and China.

The fisherwomen of Ra observe traditional territorial rights. They take particular care not to disturb one another's fishing areas and seasons.

Customary beliefs help maintain this mutual restraint. They consider the sea capable of dispensing penalties on encroachers. These may take the form of ray stings or fish poison or even a total lack of catch for the offender.

Fiji's Ministry for Women has a programme on Social and Economic Development for Women. This is usually organised around workshops and training agendas.

On the social front, they cover issues of environment, school lunch programmes, hygiene and personal goal setting. On the economic side, they deal with elementary matters of business and finance like budgeting, costing and pricing, and bookkeeping.

However, according to Saukalou, even though women do participate, fishing is generally perceived to be an activity meant for men.

When they get married to men outside their locality, women who fish refuse to do so if the prevailing customs in that village are against their participation.

A woman can fish only if her husband has rights and that too only if he is alive. She has no right to fish if her husband is dead and if she does not have *sons*. In *general*, Saukalou observes, women have a secondary status in Fijian society.

The Ministry for Women chooses to emphasise the importance of the women's own knowledge and ways of living. At the same time, it seeks to raise their economic standard of living.

Amidst fears that the production from marine fisheries will taper off, the Department of Fisheries is gearing up to focus on management and awareness-building programmes for the public.

In the pipeline is a programme to set up within the Department a Fisheries Management Board, with autonomy for all the separate sections.

About the status of Fiji's women, Saulcalou says, "I feel fishing is one area which they understand and adapt to well. Above all, it is a traditional obligation of their community."

This feeling is echoed by Milika Naqasima, convener, board of trustees of the Women and Fisheries Network, headquartered in Fiji. "As regular food providers within semi-subsistence communities," she elaborates, "women are well placed to perform a central role as fisheries resource managers."

"But," cautions Milka Naqasima, "the continued neglect of women's fisheries activities and of subsistence fisheries in general could have critical implications for the future food security, the health and the very survival of Pacific island communities." ■

This article is based on accounts by Serana Saukalou and Millka Naqasima of Fiji and the South Pacific Mission of ICSF