

The challenges of seafood marketing in Fiji

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Seafood marketing is becoming one of the major occupations for women in Fiji and other Pacific Island countries. As home keepers or home budgeters, women have transferred skills associated with home budgeting and planning to assist in their seafood marketing activities. Marketing is not just sitting at the market beside a pile of shellfish or a string of fish. It is hard work and involves post harvest or preservation skills, plus a series of networks and processes to get the products to the market. A decade ago, Ram (1993), pointed out that, “planners have assumed that it is only the men who are seriously involved in all aspects of the fishing industry, while women basically fish to feed the family and are responsible for housekeeping and children, thus women become the ‘invisible fisher folk’ who do not appear in the statistics of island countries”. Unfortunately women’s status has not significantly improved in the region since then.

Currently, women are moving into new fishing areas, with women captains on tuna long liners (such as in Tahiti), or have broken the trend and are in some cases working alongside men in ports and offshore fisheries (such as in the cases of Solomon Islands and Fiji). Women are also, in some cases, moving into previously male dominated fishing areas, such as beche-de-mer diving and deep-sea fishing in open boats. But can technological improvements increase women’s fishing participation? A comparison of men’s and women’s fishing participation progress cannot be restricted to advances in technology and gear, but should include changes in areas of fishing emphasis, fishing trends and patterns and how these affects their roles. Most of the constraints and disadvantages that hindered women’s full participation in fisheries development 10 years ago still exist today. Cultural and social norms and attitudes have contributed in part to the still-passive roles women play in society and the subordinate

roles they play alongside men in nearly all areas of fisheries development.

Past studies of Fiji’s subsistence fishery have noted the significant reliance on the subsistence fishery, in particular the enormous contribution of women (Rawlinson et al. 1997; Veitayaki 1998; Vunisea 1996). A survey of the subsistence and artisanal fisheries in rural areas of Viti Levu (Rawlinson et al. 1997) established that 99.3% of households interviewed consumed seafood once a week. These were mostly coastal Fijian villages, as opposed to inland villages. Given that the majority of people in the semi-urban and rural areas of Fiji still lead a subsistence lifestyle, this high reliance on seafood should not be surprising. Of the sampled population, Fijian adult females (45.3%) were the most active fisher groups, whereas Indian adult females undertook the least amount of fishing. This can be explained by the cultural context of fishing in Fiji where Indo-Fijian women are involved in fishing preparation and post harvest activities to some degree, but are not part of the harvesting, whereas for Fijian women, this is a way of life in villages. Despite the documentation of the high involvement of women, they are still marginally involved in fisheries development.

This study focused on Viti Levu, however, patterns or trends in fishing would not differ much in other locations in Fiji. Marketing effort may also be less in Vanua Levu and other areas of Fiji compared with Viti Levu. A study on those islands, which do not have access to any major markets on the mainland, may come up with very different fishing patterns and emphasis. Fishing in these areas is still primarily seasonal, sporadic and flexible in nature.

Up to 2000, the subsistence fishery estimates for Fiji were still based on a survey undertaken in 1978 by the Fisheries Department, with the addi-

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tion of 200 t/year to cover population growth. With the lack of specific figures and data on the value of the subsistence fisheries, a breakdown of specific subsistence and semi-subsistence activities at the village level cannot be determined. As a consequence of this, women's fishing participation will continue to fall within the unremunerated or informal sector, thus the undermining of the value of their fisheries participation. Women's fishing activities however, continue to increase rapidly, with very little effort or commitment by officials on monitoring their activities. Fisheries Department programmes and policies are increasingly directed to reducing fishing effort in coastal areas by diverting fishing activities to the outer lagoon and oceanic areas. The move has not put a check on women's fishing participation but has effectively shifted the focus away from their activities, thus the consistent lack of reliable data, and of social and scientific surveys on their fishery.

In Fiji's municipal markets, seafood is available throughout the year. Apart from seasonally harvested species, most seafood comes from fishing villages with access to municipal centres. In the Suva market for example, these comprise coastal villages and fishing communities in the Tailevu and Rewa provinces, the major provinces within the immediate Suva area. In some coastal communities, fishing has been more intense over the past 6-10 years due to consumer and market demands. In some cases, the opening up of roads and transportation to rural fishing locations has triggered intense fishing activities. This is the case of seafood marketing from Muaivuso, for example, a district directly opposite the Suva peninsular. Road construction in the last decade has enabled increased marketing and exchange of various seafood.

The selling of undersized crabs, fish and shellfish is not uncommon in these markets. Measures to specifically address women's fishing participation and the depletion of resources within their target areas, is almost non-existent. Where there are management initiatives in place, women are usually the least involved and the least informed. Information and communication on stock depletion, threats to fisheries, or the need for sustainable approaches, reach those who are already aware of the problems and not those who are using resources in rural areas. From experiences through working with women in communities in Fiji, difficulties in getting women involved in projects arise from social and traditional obligations of women. During community training and meetings, women normally

attend to the necessary chores of the household and village, catering for visitors and totally missing out on any organised activities. In the process, they are unaware of development and management issues and concerns and at the same time, their fishing knowledge and skills are left out of decision-making processes.



Photo: Timoci Gaunavinala

Selling seashells and other invertebrates

The lack of training in fisheries development is due in part to social and traditional attitudes. This results in women's participation in fisheries regarded as just gleaning and collecting, with no credit given to their skills, wealth of knowledge, traditional understanding of species, habitats, seasons and other fisheries issues women possess. In fact, an understanding of women's indigenous technical knowledge with regards to women's fishing activities is still largely lacking.

Selling seafood is not confined to municipal markets, women also sell on roadsides, to restaurants and shops, and to people in settlements and communities. In some of these activities, women are assisted by children or by men. Distribution of catches is not an entirely foreign concept because in the past, women were responsible for food exchange through barter systems. This was where the exchange of food between coastal and inland villages took place, especially during special fish or shellfish seasons. Current exchange of seafood, which is practised to a small extent, is still along kinship lines and especially between rural coastal dwellers and relatives in urban areas. The subsistence fishery therefore supports small-scale commercial fishing operations and also the continuous exchange of seafood between rural dwellers and their urban relatives.

Marketing involves women travelling through provincial, town and island boundaries to get products from all over the country to the main markets on Viti Levu. In the Suva market, sellers are from various provinces and coastal communities. One female fish seller interviewed at the Suva market (pers. comm. December, 2003) explained that her husband travelled weekly to the other main island, Vanua Levu, to buy seafood. Clams and other seafood that he bought from villages in the Bua district were shipped to Suva on the inter-island ferry, and the woman sold the seafood from Thursday to Saturday each week at the Suva market. This was not an isolated activity, as other people were also involved in buying from the islands to sell in the main city market.



Photo: Timoci Gaunavivaka

Selling kai

There are also instances of vendors travelling by boat from the smaller islands to different points on the main island of Viti Levu, from where they catch buses or carriers (open trucks) to Suva. Interviews with men and women at the Suva market on a Saturday (pers. comm. December 2003) revealed that people who came to the Suva market from Moturiki and other outlying islands in the Lomaiviti group, arrived the day before in Waidalice, a village on the east coast of Viti Levu. They then either boarded with relatives or slept outside the market, waiting to sell their products (mostly crabs and land crabs). Thus, most travelling is from Thursday each week. Women from Verata, Namara, Noco, Nakelo, Kaba and other villagers from within the immediate Nausori area,

who were at the Suva market stated that they preferred to sell in Suva although Nausori town was closer to them because there were more customers, and goods can be sold at a higher price. These women start coming to the market as early as midnight on Fridays so they can secure a good selling spot. They spend the whole night outside the Suva market and return home only after selling their seafood, which is usually late the next afternoon (Saturday). Women from villages closer to the main markets also leave early in the morning to be able to secure good selling points.

Institutional structures to support seafood marketing activities are non-existent, and the dynamics of the markets, networks and coping strategies that exist are only known to people that use them. The transfer of seafood between islands and towns is hardly monitored. Rural coastal people, in the bid to participate in the market economy, have exploited traditional kinship and ties to enable transportation of goods across islands. These activities, although receiving no formal support mechanism, boom alongside formally organised activities. These transportation and marketing links and networks provide support systems for the many women involved in seafood trading.

Many techniques and routes are used to distribute seafood around Fiji. Rural women have made inroads into urban markets. Women from the western islands and villages of Fiji are selling seafood in the east and vice versa. This two-way trade involves not only seafood but fruits and food crops. During the orange season, oranges from the east flood the western markets. During the mango season, the western mangoes flood the eastern markets.



Photo: Timoci Gaunavivaka

Selling oranges, mangoes and other products

A steady stream of seafood such as sea grapes, fish, seaweed and clams, which are sold at the Suva market, are from the Yasawa islands to the west of Lautoka. Road travel from Lautoka to Suva is about four hours on mini buses that travel daily between the two cities.

Women from the Yasawas also sell weekly at the Lautoka market. In some cases, Yasawa women living in Lautoka act as brokers who order and purchase seafood from the islands. In other cases, Yasawa women fish, preserve their catch, transport it to the mainland and board with relatives in Lautoka while they sell their products. Much of the abundant seafood in the Lautoka market, including seaweeds, clams, crabs and smoked fish, are from the Yasawas. Fish is smoked because of poor transportation services and problems with freezers. Most of the women interviewed had to leave Yasawa on Thursday and sell their seafood on Friday and Saturday before returning home.



Photo: Timoci Gaunavinaka

Women in carriers

In Labasa on Vanua Levu, fish is sold fresh almost daily by small-scale boat operators from nearby villages and by commercial boat owners while women sell seafood only on Saturdays. Because of transportation problems, the women on the northeast coast of Vanua Levu come to the town market only once a week. Fish sold by them are mostly smoked because of the lack of refrigeration facilities in their villages. They also sell crabs, shellfish, seaweed and other marine products.

Women from Udu, who are the usual weekend vendors, come into town on the morning bus and return home on the afternoon bus the same day. Most of the women vendors at the Labasa market travel to town on Thursday evening from their villages and sleep in the market to await marketing the next day. Most of these women travel with their families.

In Ba town, in western Viti Levu, women are not major fish or marine food sellers but they can be seen almost daily diving for freshwater mussels

and selling their goods at the market. Women from Votua in Ba for example, come on the early morning bus to town and dive for the mussels in the stretch of the Ba River closest to town. From the river, the mussels (*kai*) are taken directly to the market to be sold. In the village, women depend significantly on marine resources for their subsistence livelihood, and selling marine products occurs only with special species during specific seasons. For example, well known to the people of Votua, is a certain season when tiger prawns appear in large numbers from the sea and travel inland through the Ba River. The people are familiar with the seasons when this happens (when the mangoes start to flower) and they await their arrival, having nets ready. When the prawns appear, they are caught in the hundreds and sold from the village to buyers who usually come down to the village to get them.

In the Nausori market in eastern Viti Levu, women from the inland villages sell *kai* almost daily. Women in several villages of Naitasiri province that sell *kai*, take turns at selling at the market on weekends. The eight villages have an arrangement where women from four villages take turns in selling on alternate weeks. *Kai* gathering is done nearly daily, with selling also conducted daily.

The need for institutional support

In spite of women's increasing participation in marketing resources, there are no support institutions to assist them. There are no available credit facilities, resulting in women taking out unsecured, small amounts of credit from shops. Therefore there is little opportunity for long-term planning or financial development. In Verata, Vunisea (1996) recounts coping strategies that women use to assist in their fishing and marketing activities. Women buy groceries and other goods on credit from village shops, and use other services on credit, which are paid after marketing. This includes transportation costs to the outer reefs, carriers or trucks costs to town and market costs for the products that they bring in to be sold. These costs are only settled after women sell their products. At the end of the market day, after all the costs and debts are paid off, the profit made is very small. Consequently, women are locked in a vicious cycle where they are pushed to continually fish in order to pay off credit they accumulate, but the result is that they have no real profit at the end of the day. In addition, the need for money has prompted women to sell most of their catches and at the end of the marketing to buy cheap meat and tinned food for the family. Increasing reliance on inferior quality foods has resulted in poor nutrition in areas where people rely significantly on marine resources for their economic livelihood.

In the case of Verata, women belong to different groups in the village. Within these groups, women organise themselves and pay boat owners to go fishing together, and take turns at taking goods to the market. Through this sort of arrangement, women are able to save on costs and time when going fishing and when marketing products.

Transportation to markets is not only at irregular hours, but is in most cases very unsafe, as trucks are usually overloaded and women are subjected to travelling without proper safety standards. In the case of women from the Yasawas and other outer islands travelling to Viti Levu, travel is usually in open powered boats. Because they live in rural coastal villages, travel to the market could take between six to eight hours on the boats and four to five hours on trucks.

At the markets, women rush to secure good selling locations, so they leave early in the morning, and as a result lose proper sleep and meals. Most women forgo meals for up to half a day to try and sell off their products. After continuous fishing and selling, women can, over time, develop nutritional and other health problems. In most instances the nutrition and health of their families also suffers, when more time is taken up by fishing and marketing. In most of these fishing and marketing activities, women use older women or sisters to look after their families, thus the burden of increased fishing and selling again falls on women.

vation techniques before leaving their villages. As explained earlier, most services used are settled after selling. Women in their marketing activities, exploit kinship ties or *veiwekani* to secure boarding places in urban areas. Selling, setting prices and ensuring a profit margin is another challenge. These women walk the fine line between the two worlds of tradition and modern market demands. This is where they are expected to meet all traditional obligations and social expectations in their everyday village activities, and at the same time compete in the market economy. Modern challenges of economising, progressive planning and budgeting are realities that women are addressing through their marketing activities.

Despite the involvement of women, their roles and the value of their work are not fully acknowledged. This is because there is an assumption that women's fishing participation, especially commercial related activities, are part of their everyday work and are not regarded as independent economic activities.

The challenges

On one hand, women have attained empowerment and independence through participating in fisheries, but on the other hand, they face many constraints and difficulties. There are several areas where governments and women's organisations can assist the Fiji fisherwomen.

Institutions and networks that are used by women as coping strategies at the village level should be recognised and used by development practitioners working with fisherwomen. Rural networks could provide enhanced avenues for trade. For example, instead of women working through middlemen in distant markets, they could exchange or buy seafood from other women's groups.

Such networks could also facilitate the transfer of information and technologies related to improved fishing, processing and preservation. The networks can be used to facilitate awareness and education work that specifically targets women. Improvement of their knowledge base could assist women in addressing problems related to the use of destructive fishing methods, overharvesting, and long-term impacts of resource depletion.



Photo: Timoci Gaunavimaka

**Securing good selling points:
Villages have their usual spots where they sell from every weekend.**

Selling is only a small part of the whole dynamics of marketing for women must secure transportation, accommodation, gifts, selling spots and preser-

vation techniques before leaving their villages. As explained earlier, most services used are settled after selling. Women in their marketing activities, exploit kinship ties or *veiwekani* to secure boarding places in urban areas. Selling, setting prices and ensuring a profit margin is another challenge. These women walk the fine line between the two worlds of tradition and modern market demands. This is where they are expected to meet all traditional obligations and social expectations in their everyday village activities, and at the same time compete in the market economy. Modern challenges of economising, progressive planning and budgeting are realities that women are addressing through their marketing activities.

Fijian Administration, women's NGOs, municipal authorities and business organisations. The introduction of technologies to ease work burdens and improve the health of women engaged in harvesting and processing should also be seriously considered. The traditional knowledge, skills and understanding that women have of their fisheries, should be documented and preserved. Such knowledge will be useful for the sustainable use of resources and could enhance coastal management initiatives.

Proper evaluation of the subsistence fishery is essential. In particular, the participation of women should be accurately assessed to provide data for consideration by those who lead fisheries development efforts. Availability of accurate data on their commercial activities could also support the bid by women fishers to be considered for loans and small-scale financial assistance.

Proper training and assistance should be provided to women engaged in the expanding trade in cooked seafood so that the foods meet national health standards. There is also a need to educate women about the value of the fresh foods they sell and the relatively inferior nutritional quality of many of the foods that women purchase with their fishing incomes.

The Department of Women and Culture and women's NGOs in Fiji could work towards setting up a national fisherwomen's organisation that would include fish sellers and look after the welfare of female fishworkers. Another area requiring attention from such an organisation is how to deal with surpluses in seafood so that these can be preserved for sale.

The future

Women's participation in fishing has expanded to include postharvest, distribution and marketing activities. Because these activities are poorly documented and unrecognized, women have difficulty organising themselves officially as fish workers. Their fishing activities are considered a part of their household chores rather than as serious economic ventures. As a consequence, women are still expected to attend to all their domestic chores even when fishing and marketing consumes large portions of their work week. In traditionally organised, rural Fijian societies, the roles of men and women are defined, and women, despite their many other activities outside their homes, must meet traditional and household obligations. These women are caught between trying to meet both their traditional and modern roles through their seafood marketing activities.

Globalisation has forced fishing communities to develop strategies for securing their livelihoods. Women rely on their village groupings and networks to survive in the competitive market economy. Women still lack negotiating power because they are excluded from decision making at the village level. They also lack control over assets that might enable them to set up proper economic ventures. Yet, in spite of all these challenges, women function as "invisible participants" in the modern market economy in order to meet obligations to provide for basic household security. For this situation to change in the context of a strongly patriarchal culture, governments will have to set in place an enabling legal environment that recognises, protects and strengthens the rights of women in Fiji.

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