

Reflections on gender, fisheries and managing the environment: Solomon Islands case study

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Abstract

This paper explores the interface of gender, fisheries and natural resource management. A socioeconomic study was designed to capture the gender perspectives of government officials, fisheries officers, non-governmental organisation professionals, and community members in Solomon Islands. In total, 21 individuals (15 women and 6 men) from over 17 separate private and public institutions were interviewed to collect opinions and observations on integrating gender into natural resource management, conservation and development. The study summarised the key findings into seven focal areas:

1. misconceptions of culture and gender roles;
2. transitioning from a traditional community to a modern society;
3. Solomon Islands women, fisheries and managing the environment;
4. the role of the national government in promoting and facilitating gender mainstreaming;
5. women's empowerment and capacity building through education and training;
6. communication and messaging about gender equality and women's empowerment; and
7. suggestions and techniques for improving awareness on gender and encouraging the balanced participation of men and women.

These key findings are intended to be used to improve efforts to integrate gender into natural resource management taking place in Solomon Islands and the wider Pacific.

Background

Socioecological context of Solomon Islands

Solomon Islands, similar to many Pacific Island nations, has a subsistence-based economy that relies on artisanal agriculture (yams, sweet potatoes, cabbages) and subsistence fishing (gleaning shellfish, small-scale aquaculture, nearshore fisheries) to provide for the food and livelihoods of more than half of the country's population of 500,000 people (Permanent Mission of Solomon Islands to the United Nations 2019).

Nearshore fisheries alone account for roughly 60% of consumption needs (Weeratunge et al. 2011). Furthermore, it is estimated that 50% of all women and 90% of all men participate in small-scale fishing in Solomon Islands (Gillett and Lightfoot 2012). The major economic sectors within Solomon Islands are agriculture or the extraction of natural resources. The main industries in the country are copra, timber, palm oil, fish, cocoa and beef cattle (FAO 2016).

Converging with this dependence on natural resources is the existence of the *wantok* system, which is a defining societal feature. The *wantok* system can be described as 'a network of cooperation, caring and reciprocal support, and a shared attachment to *kastom* and locality' (Nanau 2011). In

practice, someone's *wantok* refers to a relative or member of the same village, although in a global context this circle can expand to incorporate Solomon Islanders in general, or even Melanesians as a whole. Members of the same *wantok* have a common sense of responsibility toward each other and share communal access to natural resources from gardens or fishing grounds. This support system is both praised for its unifying qualities and regarded as an obstacle to development and national unity. Even in today's modern times, the *wantok* system dominates social dynamics and governs access to wealth and resources.

Status of gender equality in Solomon Islands

Like many countries of the Asia-Pacific region, Solomon Islands struggles to provide equal opportunities and a safe environment for women. Progress has been made in expanding access to healthcare and education services to both men and women in recent decades; however, strict gender roles from traditional community structures persist, which prevent women's access to many economic opportunities. In some of the more conservative countries, women refuse to participate in public discussions and are at the whim of decisions made by male family and community members. In urban areas, far more men than women are employed and earn formal salaries, and twice as many men as women complete secondary

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Keywords

gender, fisheries, empowerment, Pacific, culture



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education. In addition, the number of recognised female leaders is very low, with only one female representative in parliament (SINSO 2014). Furthermore, Solomon Islands has one of the highest rates of family and sexual violence in the world, with 64% of women aged 15–49 reporting physical or sexual abuse by a partner (Ming et al. 2016).

Despite these limitations, women in Solomon Islands are characterised by their strength and resourcefulness. Charged with the responsibilities of maintaining and caring for the family, women are highly valued traditionally for their knowledge, skills, and proficiency in the home and in subsistence agriculture and nearshore fishing. In some communities, especially those where matrilineal cultures persist, women are socially influential and are often active participants in community discussions and decisions. With the increasing prevalence of education and opportunity, the role of women in Solomon Islands, as well as in other countries of the Asia-Pacific region, is changing. Women in urban areas today are balancing traditional customs and identities with the demands of modern life. Solomon Islands today hosts a fair number of gender-focused projects and programmes, thus highlighting the public discussion that has commenced on the topic of gender.

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Solomon Islands women in fisheries

Traditionally, and in modern times, women have played a primary role in the collection of nearshore fish and invertebrates, and the harvesting resources from mangroves and other coastal and nearshore habitats in order to provide subsistence protein for their families and for sale (Chapman 1987). It is estimated that in the Pacific Islands region, 56% of the total estimated small-scale fisheries catches are from women (Harper et al. 2012). Furthermore, with the expansion of the pelagic commercial fishery, women have provided the major labour force for fish processing in this sector (Harper et al. 2013).

Despite this high level of participation in fishing activities and the fishing industry, women's contribution to the economy and their communities from fishing and harvesting activities are frequently overlooked. In marine resource management projects and programmes, women have often played a limited role due to the traditional male-dominated leadership of communities and clan systems. However, more and more, women's contributions to this space are being recognised. Women are now the target of localised projects and have begun to instigate mechanisms to support sustainable resource management of coastal and marine resources. For example, the women of Rovianna Lagoon in the Western Province of Solomon Islands participate in structured management programmes of a mud clams, which are a key local resource with practical nutritional and cultural value

(Aswani and Weiant 2004). Furthermore, the emergence of Savings Groups, groups in which women grow and manage secure funds to support their families and their communities, has further supported women to become active in community improvement initiatives, including the promotion of sustainable management of natural resources.

The need to better integrate women in the fisheries managed sector has been widely recognised. The Solomon Islands Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources instituted a Gender Implementation Strategy (2011–2014) to move toward a more gender-informed approach to coastal fisheries management and development (Krushelnytska 2016). Through mechanisms such as this, the government is beginning to address the extreme segregation in jobs and salaries in the fisheries sector. With the growing recognition of women's high levels of participation in the fisheries sector, the challenge facing government officials and non-governmental organisations is how to functionally integrate these two traditionally separate spheres – marine resource management and gender equality and women's empowerment. This study incorporates views from a broad scope of public sector agencies; however, the findings and recommendations are intended to apply particularly to the context of fisheries and marine resource management among other focus areas.

Methodology

The study used a set of open-ended questions to explore individual views (of both women and men) and experiences on incorporating gender dimensions into natural resource management, conservation, development and public service projects and me. The types of questions varied from simple information seeking, to observations on gender-related themes, to opinions on statements concerning gender found in publically available texts. Targeted interviews posed these questions to individuals representing and/or leading organisations or initiatives in these sectors. The interviews were conducted informally to encourage open conversation and the free expression of views. The questions were used to guide the discussion but, were not followed in a strict format by either the interviewers or the interviewees, with the overall purpose of collecting expert views and opinions on progress made and challenges facing the integration of gender dimensions into natural resource development initiatives.

The study is fairly limited in its scope and methodology. In total, 21 individuals (15 women and 6 men) were interviewed, representing 17 separate institutions based in Honiara, Solomon Islands. These institutions and individuals were selected for their prior or current engagement in natural resource management, development, public service programmes, and their likelihood of accepting the solicitation to be interviewed based on their prior social connection with interviewers or their existing engagement on the topic of gender. Consequently, the results are biased as each of these individuals was predisposed to favouring gender integration and women's empowerment. However, because each individual interviewed was a director or leader and represented their respective institutions, their opinions on gender

and their insights on the challenges of integrating gender dimensions into natural resource management programmes was extremely valuable. Despite the limitations, this study exposed a wide breadth of experience, and identified key observations and lessons learned that can be considered and incorporated into new and ongoing programmes.

Key findings

The key findings summarised below touch on a wide range of topics that influence gender roles and culture in Solomon Islands, and shed light on challenges faced by practitioners working to integrate gender and natural resource management. The observations and opinions of the study participants gathered from these interviews have been compiled into the following seven focal areas.

Focal Area 1: Misconceptions of culture and gender roles in Solomon Islands

The interviews confirmed many aspects of Solomon Islands society and the status of gender equality that have been reported on in other sources. Public and private sectors are largely male driven at the upper levels of management. There is a resounding perspective that women will be less likely to prioritise their work in the face of family matters and are therefore not desired applicants for important positions. In recent years, some women have made headway into upper management roles, and this dynamic is increasing; however, the majority of women working in professional positions hold more socially acceptable roles for women, such as secretarial or administrative work.

Despite these trends, significant differences in culture and language across the country, as well as the persistence of both patrilineal and matrilineal systems, make generalising women's role in society very difficult. On some islands, such as Isabel, women have organised themselves in groups such as the Mother's Union (a group of women belonging to the Anglican Church, which travels throughout the island to conduct awareness on the importance of resource management), and have meaningful influence regarding natural resource use and management within their communities. In other communities, women are frequently left out of community decisions that have direct impacts on them, such as logging. This lack of consistency across the country forces natural resource management and development practitioners to address gender dimensions and other social issues using techniques and methodologies that are highly localised. Furthermore, a lack of understanding of the complexities of culture within Solomon Islands has bred misconceptions about women's level of influence within their families and communities. As Willie Kokopu, Fisheries Officer for the Guadalcanal Province commented: 'Women are involved to some extent in everything.' Eva Wagapu from the Solomon Islands Ministry of Women, Youth, Children, and the Family Affairs confirmed: 'It is hard to tell when the chief makes decisions alone, or when the communities make decisions together.' In reality, the extent to which women influence decisions made in their communities is extremely varied across the country. Women

may not be chief, but within the family and in many communities, they can have a high degree of influence.

Focal Area 2: Transitioning from a traditional community to a modern society

The transition from traditional community structures to more modern, and often urban, settings has caused waves of change within the social and political dynamics of the country. As Elice Matiki, Trustee of the Taumako I Nukufero Savings Club commented: 'Strong traditional culture has advantages as well as disadvantages.' For example, under the traditional governance system with an intact chief system, social problems are actively dealt with by a chief and/or village committee of elders in a variety of ways, such as exile or compensation for various crimes. In some areas of the country, these traditional governance systems still function and are often considered to be efficient in maintaining communal peace and well-being of the community. Traditional values are embedded in the *wantok* system and the family. As Agnetha Vave-Karamui of the Ministry of Environment explained: 'You have a role first to your family, otherwise you won't be anybody in the community.'

In modern settings, the breakdown of the traditional governance system has hindered its capacity to effectively manage social problems. The traditional governance system is theoretically to be replaced with a democratic society; however, the transition between these two very different governance systems has been slow, and social challenges have emerged where the old and new values conflict. For example, as Agnetha Vave-Karamui of the Ministry of Environment explained: 'In the traditional setting, women don't drink or go to nightclubs, now women are saying this is my right and that causes violence.' Also, when women are employed, this changes the traditional roles women are expected to play in the home. As Nelly Kere of the Ministry of Environment commented, this extensive breakdown of traditional gender roles 'sometimes causes men to feel insecure; before we knew our customs and now it's not strong like before.' Elsie Wickham of the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs summarised: 'Before it was a communal system and now it is an individual system' and this upheaval has had some negative effects such as the increase in domestic violence.

Even though this transition from traditional to modern governance systems has caused some social conflict, it has also opened many doors for the advancement of women and the ultimate social and economic well-being of the nation. More than ever before, women are participating in the public and private sector, achieving higher levels of education, and receiving training on various disciplines such as engineering, law, fisheries and other traditionally male professions. As Billy Mae of Rural Training Centres noted on the island of Isabel, there is a woman 'wearing a hard hat' and doing building construction and maintenance, a change never before seen. Similarly, Martha Manaka, a lawyer with the Landowners Advocacy and Legal Support Unit noted that her education and title have shifted the power dynamics she experiences saying, 'the term "lawyer" carries respect.' This change has been influenced by increases in opportunities for



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women to receive an education and find employment as well and by improvements in technology and media, increased urbanisation, and other factors.

In the pursuit of progressing women's empowerment, the virtues of traditional cultural systems cannot, and must not, be ignored or forgotten. For example, the creation of Saving's Clubs, groups in which women grow and manage secure funds to support their families and their communities, are based largely on traditional social security practices associated with the *wantok* system and have been improved to ensure long-term sustainability and fairness for communities' financial resources. As Duta Bero Kauhiona expressed: 'Valuable aspects of the culture are based on respect – women have to be mindful of those as well while in business and promoting rights.' By focusing on enhancing traditional practices instead of changing central values, the strength of traditional systems to maintain social well-being can be leveraged.

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Focal Area 3: Solomon Islands women, fisheries and managing the environment

Women in Solomon Islands have an intimate relationship to the environment and the resources it provides. Eva Wagapu of the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children, and Family Affairs explained that traditionally women are 'responsible for the garden, bringing the food home, and planning the planting to feed the family for months.' Similarly, women often go out reef gleaning, collecting marine invertebrates and other species in seagrass beds, and fishing for the family in the near-shore reefs. In the past, these activities have been solely for the purpose of providing for the family; however, in conjunction with the decline of marine resources, population growth, and shifting preferences, the species of marine resources traditionally harvested by women are now becoming commercialised at the local and national level. Market demand for species such as mussels, oysters, sea urchins, clams, mud crabs and other animals has brought women into income-generating activities.

Today, more emphasis has been placed on enveloping women into the fold of these community discussions and decisions on the use and management of natural resources. For example, today many community councils 'tend to have a woman representative, and women are more trusted to look after money,' says Ronnelle Panda of the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources. The increased inclusion of women is important because women and men are subject to different degrees of vulnerability and often have different concerns based on the roles and responsibilities they hold. Nelly Kere from the Ministry of Environment commented that when considering climate change, 'women are more concerned about food, while men are more concerned about infrastructure.' The

perspectives of women, just like those of men, are integral to preparing for and adapting to climate change, and must be considered in equal measure. In the case of logging, women are often disproportionately affected. As Lisa Horiwapu from Vois Blo Mere explained: 'Logging is making work harder... especially when women have to walk long distances to fetch clean water because the river is spoiled.' Other social changes in communities with logging are often disconcerting. Families often turn from eating from their gardens to using money to buy processed food, and there is a higher prevalence of alcohol, crime, and other social problems.

The perspectives of women, as primary caregivers and providers for the family, are essential for maintaining the sustainability of the environment and natural resources. Kristina Fidali of the United Nations Development Programme recounted that women have played very important roles in bridging dialogue between coastal and upland communities. Through their understanding of ecosystems through traditional knowledge and acknowledgement regarding the connectivity of the land and sea, they are helping their communities to negotiate and work together to manage their respective resources. As Elmah Panisi of Live and Learn commented: 'Women make good decisions in the community... men really appreciate this, they can see the logic of why they need to include women in the decision-making.' With the support of some communities, and of public and private sectors, study participants recognised that women are slowly beginning to be brought into the fold on natural resource management projects and programmes.

Focal Area 4: The role of the national government in promoting and facilitating gender mainstreaming

The overwhelming opinion of study participants indicates that the national government should facilitate the process of gender mainstreaming throughout both the public and private sectors. As explained by Matilda Watesao of the Ministry of Rural Development, the role of the national government is to 'facilitate and support the process for private sector and NGOs to provide services for the people.' This includes the formation of policies and legislation that can provide guidance on the incorporation of women into the workforce and the protection of women in society. Improving the ability of women to own their own property and have access to disposable incomes were outlined as particularly important steps towards improving the well-being of women in Solomon Islands. In addition, with the variety of *wantoks* and cultures that exist within the country, it is wise to proceed in an open and nondiscriminatory discourse that promotes clear, direct messages on national level gender-related laws and initiatives. The national government should also strive to rise above the *wantok* divides, and seek to improve systems that share benefits fairly across the country.

One of the most fundamental building blocks to improving the well-being of women is improving equal access and representation in public and private sector services and programmes. Delvene Boso of WorldFish stated that the national government should 'ensure that all views [are included], not just those of men. All views, men and women, need to be

brought to the table and heard because they are all active in the fisheries sector.’ Furthermore, Agnetha Vave-Karamui expressed that ‘opportunities have to be accessible – our systems must understand that these needs are different [for men and women] – roads to get places, services, places to ask questions, etc.’ For example, access to banking and health services are often poorly designed to accommodate women, such as providing culturally appropriate spaces for women to ask questions about banking and accessing funds as well as facilities for pregnant women to rest while waiting in bank queues. Some government officers, such as Willie Kokopu who is a Fisheries Officer with the Guadalcanal Province, strive to include men and women in fishing trainings and capacity development sessions. Inclusive practices such as this need to be expanded and institutionalised into all public and private sector services and programmes.

Focal Area 5: Women’s empowerment and capacity building through education and training

Building the capacity of women to contribute meaningfully to their society is a basic way of improving the well-being of women in Solomon Islands. Elmah Panisi of Live and Learn explained that when ‘women think about their roles and think about the things that are happening, they start to become empowered and now some come out to the community and participate in community discussions.’ Education is widely agreed to be the cornerstone of building the confidence and capacity of women. More girls are receiving an education today than ever before, but the ratio of educated women to men is still very low. Projects and programmes aimed at improving women’s capacity to manage finances and improve marketable skills have made demonstrable improvements; however, a national discussion on the importance of education and extending access to education should be a top priority.

Positive effects of increasing the capacity of women are evident. Informal surveys administered by WorldFish in north Malaita showed that when women have access to disposable income, they spent it on school fees, medical bills and food, while men tended to spend some funds on other non-essential items such as cigarettes and betel nut. Specifically, in regard to finance, women have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to successfully engage in the market economy and make economically responsible decisions. Community projects, such as Saving’s Club, have demonstrated that women have the ability and capacity to responsibly manage funds to support communities and the individuals within. Women active in selling produce and marine resources in local markets have shown their ability to understand and incorporate business practices such as value-adding, record keeping and others. Billy Mae of Rural Training Centres explained that ‘women do the traditional skills, agriculture and life skills; infrastructure and construction is [most often] done by men.’ However, the courses offered at these facilities are open to both men and women, and women are starting to enter into the

courses traditionally dominated by men. Thus, women are slowly starting to see opportunities. Progress may be slow but providing equal access to opportunities allows women and their communities to build capacity in new, non-traditional ways, and to improve prospects for economic development and prosperity.

Focal Area 6: Communication and messaging about gender equality and women’s empowerment

To aid in developing social discussions on gender equity and women’s empowerment, success stories of women becoming empowered and benefiting their families and communities should be communicated and shared broadly. As stated by Agnetha Vave-Karamui of the Ministry of Environment: ‘We need champions and good stories of how inequality has been dealt with in society.’ Especially in the context of women and marine resource management, stories of women participating in management processes and community discussions without overt social conflict should be shared and learned from. Those communities with the unity, leadership and desire to do so will have the opportunity to learn from others and be able to incorporate more inclusive processes, as others have.

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Some examples of empowering women in their communities and society already exist, but they are not well known. Saving’s Clubs, such as Taumako I Nukufero Women’s Association of Nukufero in the Russell Islands, have been formed around the country and have successfully started community financial security funds as well as community improvement initiatives. Also, in Tetepare communities, women have developed successful conservation-related income-generating activities that have significantly increased their disposable income and impressed upon their communities the importance of maintaining their marine resources. And, organisations such as the Mother’s Union on Isabel Island have been active in increasing awareness about marine resource management issues and motivating many communities to start taking management actions. Due to poor communication and limited press, these success stories are not well known and the potential of these champions to inspire others is consequently hampered. One solution suggested by Kristina Fidali of the United Nations Development Programme to address this shortfall is to connect ‘different clusters of women leaders who are dealing with gender, resource management, political issues, etc.’ This could effectively encourage a conversation across sectors on improving gender equity and women’s empowerment and promote success stories with individuals and organisations in positions to incorporate those examples and lessons.



Focal Area 7: Suggestions and techniques for improving awareness about gender, and encouraging balanced participation of men and women in discussions

While there is a need for gender awareness throughout society, the mechanisms for changing gender perceptions and initiating open dialogue must take into account the family and community dynamics. As Agnetha Vave-Karamui of the Ministry of Environment expressed: 'It should not be a process that brings conflict, but enhances how do we participate equally in any decision.' With this softer approach, steps toward gender equality in Solomon Islands can be taken with little backlash, and with the greatest chance of success. This soft approach upholds principles of respect and cultural sensitivity as fundamental considerations. Malachi Tefetia, Fisheries Officer with Guadalcanal Province, recounts that separating women and men, which is consistent with traditional cultural practices, for meetings in some communities has positive impacts: 'When you separate women from men, the women come up with good ideas and [the group] gives them pride.' Without separating the men and women, he says, 'Men will dominate the discussion.' This practice uses indirect or less confrontational means of achieving broader inclusion and representation of both men and women. Through these methods, the soft approach often goes beyond simply counting women in the room, and encourages women to speak up and participate.

Several techniques were suggested by interviewees that support the application of a soft approach to incorporating gender dimensions into projects and programmes and initiating dialogue on gender equality within society. For example, trainers and facilitators working with communities should be educated on the concept of gender, prepared to guide communities through delicate discussions, and knowledgeable of socially and culturally appropriate mechanisms, such as separate women's and men's focus groups, to encourage the engagement and participation of men and women in training workshops and community discussions. Tools such as Powerpoint and visual aids should also be developed to help women (who have a low literacy rate) make meaningful contributions. Furthermore, male champions, such as elders or leaders, who speak out in support of incorporating women are invaluable in encouraging the shift in attitude and changes in culture.

Last, misguided perceptions on the meaning of the term 'gender' in Solomon Islands has hampered progress and open discussion. As explained by Kristina Fidali of the United Nations Development Programme, 'the word [gender] is tainted and confrontational. We have to pitch it at the right level and focus on the inclusion aspect... listening to the different perspectives and the different ideas that we share.' The overwhelming focus on domestic violence in Solomon Islands has created a difficult social context, and discussions surrounding topics on women and gender are mostly received defensively by both men and women. Many people perceived

discussions on gender equality as a prelude to blame and hostility. To address this reality, the communication and messaging on gender equity and women's empowerment must be improved and awareness should be conducted on the nature of gender as encompassing the roles of both men and women. Using key words such as 'inclusivity' and training that exemplifies the principles of inclusivity have the potential to address issues of gender inequality and work toward the empowerment of women and the betterment of society in a manner that is perceived less confrontationally.

Incorporating gender considerations into natural resource management and development initiatives is key to ensuring the sustainability of those solutions. Nelly Kere of the Ministry of Environment explained that: 'We need a gender lens so that women have their say on any decision that is made in the community so they have ownership.' By building ownership among both men and women through consistent messaging that reaches all social groups and demographics, community decisions will more accurately reflect the will and desire of the entire community, and behaviour changes in natural resource management and development initiatives can last and be passed along to the next generation.

Conclusion

Advancing public discussion on gender equality and making progress in women's empowerment requires effective messaging and awareness, political and social will, and support from the government, NGOs and the private sector. Moving forward, gender in Solomon Islands should be more actively studied and discussed in national and international venues to facilitate an open dialogue that raises awareness and breaks down barriers to progress. Through this more open discourse, as well as through utilising the soft approach described in this article, progress toward gender equity can be made in Solomon Islands that aligns with cultural and social reality.

Further research is needed to explore gender dynamics in Solomon Islands in order to enhance the success and sustainability of natural resource management and development interventions. Potential topics for further research include: How does the availability and/or scarcity of natural resources impact gender roles in the Solomon Islands?; How do gender interventions in marine resource management initiatives influence social and environmental outcomes?; Does being 'educated' insinuate being 'heard' and 'respected'?; Is there a correlation between the breakdown between traditional governance systems and gender-based violence? And, were things really better before? Exploring these areas through academia has the potential to positively impact the ability of national and international agencies, public and private sector to make effective progress toward improving the long-term social and environmental sustainability of natural resource management and development initiatives, and strive for gender equality in Solomon Islands.

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