

# Innovate for change, our fisheries future: A women in fisheries panel on International Women’s Day in Solomon Islands

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*‘Solomon Islands is surrounded by the ocean and we depend entirely on the sea for our food and basic needs. I think about the life we live today and wonder what the future will be like for future generations. Will our children enjoy the things we enjoy today?’ This statement was made by Iulah Pitamama from Choiseul Province, Solomon Islands, who is the only female Provincial Fisheries Officer in the country.*

## Introduction

International Women’s Day is a global celebration that is held on 8 March every year. It celebrates the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women, and calls for accelerating gender parity<sup>3</sup>. To celebrate International Women’s Day in 2019, WorldFish organised a ‘Women in Fisheries Forum’ to link fisheries management, sustainable use and livelihoods with gender equality. The forum brought together nine expert panelists from the fisheries, environment, nutrition, market and education sectors under the theme ‘Balance for the better: Our fisheries future’. The forum had two sessions: 1) sharing personal insights to engagements with gender and women within their sectors, and 2) a discussion panel on barriers to and solutions for women’s empowerment and well-being in rural areas.

## Inspirational stories

Panelists began by sharing stories of inspiration for why they work in their sectors. Sources of inspirational stories centered on three main themes: connections to the ocean, concern for the future, and women’s empowerment and raising the visibility of women in the fisheries sector.

### Connections to the ocean

People’s connectedness to the oceans was the key source of inspiration for panelists. This connectedness relates to traditional ties to the sea with local kastom, dependency on the ocean for livelihoods, and the need for fisheries sustainability. Most were inspired by the fact that the ocean gave them identity.

### Concern for the future

A general concern for future fisheries sustainability was the second popular source of inspiration. These concerns stem from the increasing human population and subsequent pressures placed on fish stocks, with a general concern of sustenance for future generations.

## Women’s empowerment and raising the visibility of women in the fisheries sector

Raising the visibility of women and empowering them across all parts of the fisheries sector was the third common inspiration. Often, women’s roles within fisheries are invisible; thus, raising the visibility of women locally, and highlighting the different roles of men and women adds to the global picture of the fisheries sector.

## Barriers to women’s participation in fisheries

Both men and women play a variety of roles within the fisheries sector in Solomon Islands, with women primarily focused on post-harvesting processes (SPC 2018). The panel discussed some of the barriers women face to participation and recognition in their fields, but also explored some of the deeper relations within society. The top three barriers are summarised below, and form some of the gender norms and gender relations that exist locally. Gender norms are defined as the standards that determine socially acceptable activities for both men and women and shape their roles. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations defines gender relations as ‘the way in which a culture or society defines rights, responsibilities, and the identities of men and women in relation to one another’ (FAO 2004). Understanding these social and cultural norms and relations is critical because they often determine how men and women experience benefits, opportunities and challenges in fisheries (SPC 2018).

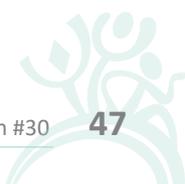
### Cultural norms and beliefs

One of the key barriers to women’s participation in fisheries is the cultural norm regarding how women and men are expected to participate in community meetings. In most communities, men are the leaders and spokespersons and it is common for men to dominate community meetings. When women attend such meetings, they are less likely to speak up and share their opinions, which is often a sign of respect for their male leaders and elders. In such a male dominant society, this could result in biased information when only half of the community voice is heard.

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<sup>3</sup> Refers to a statistical measure that provides a numerical value of female-to-male or girl-to-boy ratio for indicators such as income or education.





Participants at the Women in Fisheries Forum - ©Chelcia Gomes, WorldFish.

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*'At the community level, there are a lot of challenges. Usually the men are the ones who speak. The women have their ideas but find it difficult to share these.'* –  
Iulah Pitamama, Choiseul Province Fisheries Officer  
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Cultural beliefs can also affect women's involvement in fisheries. As an example, it is believed that pregnant women or breastfeeding mothers should not eat fish or feed fish to their young babies. This comes from the belief that fish are not good for developing babies, and that young children's stomachs are not strong enough to handle fish. Due to this belief, women and children in these communities do not benefit from the important nutrients that fish provide.

#### Low participation of women in decision-making

The lack of equal participation of women in decision-making follows closely on the heels of the cultural norm of male dominance in community meetings. In some instances, women are given the opportunity to share and be heard during discussions and be members of community committees, but this is sometimes a 'token' gesture in that it does not translate into decision-making.

#### Low literacy and education levels and lack of opportunities

Low literacy and education levels in rural areas are barriers to the participation of both men and women in accessing and receiving information and opportunities on resource management, capacity building, networking and business. The 2009 census reported high rates of school enrolment for children aged 5 years and older, but this decreases rapidly by the time children reach 14 years of age (Solomon Islands Government 2009). One reason that girls drop out of formal education is to make way for other siblings, most often their males, to continue with their education. Another barrier to women's access to opportunities is the cultural restriction on their mobility. In most rural areas, young women are not allowed to travel alone and must be accompanied by a family member. Thus, the lack of education and mobility enforced by cultural norms on the education and mobility of rural women and girls make accessing opportunities even more difficult.

#### Solutions to overcoming barriers

The panelists provided a number of recommendations to overcome these barriers of women's empowerment in rural areas, and sought to strengthen commitments for men and women in fisheries.

### Provide opportunities for women in education, and help them to access information

With the above-mentioned barriers in mind, ensuring accessibility of information and opportunities for women is one key solution. Speaking on tailoring education programmes for access by different groups, including women, Jim Hyacinth of Solomon Islands National University (SINU) likened it to ‘bringing fisheries closer to home to assist women to easily participate in fishing activities.’ This then becomes the driver for participation and contribution to issues within the community. Additionally, awareness raising activities and the dissemination of information also needs to be tailored for different community audiences to ensure that messages are translated and understood by all.

Providing a safe environment for dialogue and sharing ideas and experiences are key to getting women to participate in community discussions. Women need to know that their opinions matter and are even sought after but will not do that if they know there will be repercussions for speaking out.

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*‘Give women the opportunity for women for dialogue in a setting where they feel comfortable to speak out.’*—

Duta Kauhiona, Expanding the Reach in Solomon Islands  
Project Officer, Conservational International/  
Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources

### Engage at the household level

Another solution to overcoming barriers to women’s participation in fisheries is to engage women at the household level rather than targeting specific groups within communities. An example was shared by the UN Women’s Markets for Change project within their work on micro-savings clubs in the country where there was success with engagement strategies at the household level rather than focusing specifically on just men or women.

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*‘It is difficult to concentrate on individual men and women on the savings plan. In Solomon Islands, the household is involved.’*—

Kristy Nowland, Project Manager  
for the UN Women’s Markets for Change

### Increase visibility of women’s contribution to fisheries

Men tend to participate more in reef and offshore fishing, while women participate more in inshore areas such as lagoons and mangroves (SPC 2018). Gender norms and relations that determine what constitutes socially acceptable activities help shape these roles. In formal statistics, women’s contributions to fisheries – through gleaning and household



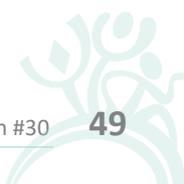
Panelists at the Women in Fisheries Forum - ©Chelcia Gomes, WorldFish.

processing – are sometimes discounted, or are lumped with men’s contributions. This can hinder the provision of opportunities for fisherwomen because the data does not reflect their contributions. Gendered research efforts – together with an understanding of cultural norms – is essential for visibility of both men and women, by tracking trends and supporting equality. Gendered research efforts – together with an understanding of cultural norms – is essential for visibility of both men and women, by tracking trends and supporting equality.

### Improve stakeholder partnerships and linkages

A key challenge in implementation of gender programs in Solomon Islands observed by panelists is that the programs are bounded within sectors. For example, gender programs in the environment and fisheries sectors has little connection to gender programs within the development sector that often has a focus on gender-based violence alleviation and human rights. The final recommendation was provided in a closed session of panelists and facilitators: to build a network of gender practitioners working across the different sectors of government and civil society groups. This would help strengthen partnerships and allow for learning and sharing of lessons across the field. The Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs (MWYCFA) was identified as the key ministry for gender mainstreaming, and would be the lead facilitator in coordinating such a network.

This challenge of sector-based silos to gender programs is likely found elsewhere in the Pacific. Such networking initiatives could also be done at the regional level, linking programs and making progress on not only Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, but also SDG14 and 15.



## Acknowledgements

This work was funded by the Australian Government through Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) project FIS/2016/300 and undertaken as part of the CGIAR Research Program on Fish Agri-Food Systems (FISH) led by WorldFish. The program is supported by contributors to the CGIAR Trust Fund.

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## List of panel participants

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## Abbreviations

ANCORS UOW- Australian National Centre Ocean Resources and Security, University of Wollongong, Australia  
CBO – Community Based Organisation  
MECDM- Ministry of Environment, Climate Change, Disaster Management and Meteorology  
MFMR- Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources  
MWYCFA- Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family and Affairs  
SIG- Solomon Islands Government  
SINU- Solomon Islands National University  
UN-M4C- United Nations Markets for Change  
WWF- World Wild Fund for Nature