

Hidden figures: The role of Indo-Fijian women in coastal fisheries

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This article is part of a Master of Science research topic² conducted between July and August 2018. The original thesis titled “Indo-Fijian fishing communities: Relationships with Taukei in coastal fisheries” investigated the socio-political and socio-economic relationships between iTaukei customary fishing rights owners and fish resource users, specifically Indo-Fijian fishers within Ba Province in Fiji. While the topic did not directly address women fishers as a user group specifically, the research highlighted the crucial role and contribution that Indo-Fijian women played in the coastal fisheries sector. This article attempts to highlight the “hidden” voices of three such women who were interviewed during the study.

Introduction

Globally, women play a diversity of roles in coastal fisheries, supporting essential services such as food security and livelihoods. These services are not limited to supporting themselves and family members, but are extended to supporting and maintaining local economies and relationships within women’s local communities. Women also play an active role in post-harvest activities, including marketing and distributing marine products from source to market. However, their contributions to the fisheries sector are often overlooked, considered insignificant and not factored into national or regional planning and support. Consequently, women in coastal fisheries face multiple challenges in accessing support and resources needed to deliver these critical services.

In the Pacific, there is an increasing focus on women’s roles in fisheries and particularly coastal fisheries (Harper et al. 2013, 2017; Thomas et al. 2017; Vunisea 1997). However, data and information limitations on the level and types of support needed for women in coastal fisheries compromise opportunities for women in this sector. As a result of limited gender- and activity-specific data that are collected at local and national levels, the actual number and participation levels of women in the sector are poorly reported and reflected. The challenge in collecting context-specific data is even more pronounced for women of different ethnicities and social groupings and the multiple roles that they perform within the sector. In Fiji’s case, for example, we note that women of different ethnic and social groups occupy and perform different and sometimes multiple roles within the coastal fisheries sector. For instance, indigenous iTaukei women are predominantly involved in specific subsistence or economic activities such as mud crabbing, whereas Fijian women of Indian descent (Indo-Fijian women) are usually traders or the middleperson involved in buying off the mud crabs and reselling.

Findings from this study support the argument that other groups, or communities, are rarely reflected in national data provisions and that there is a need for identifying and documenting the participation of all ethnic and social groups involved within the coastal fisheries supply chain in Fiji. The study finds that not only do Indo-Fijian women play a role in the patron–client relationship (as middleperson) but they also play a role in supporting male/female fishers’ livelihoods and their families involved in coastal fisheries activities.



Indo-Fijian woman vendor describing mud-crab sales and distribution at the Labasa fish market. ©Yashika Nand, WCS

Methods

A qualitative research approach enabled a range of views and perspectives to be collected on the nature of relationships between Indo-Fijian and iTaukei community members and how they use and access coastal fisheries. The research was conducted in the Ba Province of Fiji within three sites. Indo-Fijian women were not targeted participants within this study, but rather their involvement by chance within the research highlights their key role in supporting livelihoods as fisherwomen/entrepreneurs/middlepersons.

Using the snowball and convenience sampling technique, participants were interviewed at either their home or business setting. Most Indo-Fijians are not socially structured as in within iTaukei villages, but live in either townships or informal rural settlements outside the towns. Most fishers

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operate their businesses from their homes, which includes the involvement and interest of other family members including women. Consent to participate in semi-structured interviews was sought from all individuals, which allowed the conversation to flow in a structured yet open manner between the interviewer and participants. Other personal observations and field notes contributed to the overall understanding and interpretation of the information and data collected. Voice interviews were transcribed and are presented here as narratives of the women's experiences and voices from within the coastal fisheries sector.

Personal narratives of women in this sector

Priya's story

Priya is the daughter-in-law in a family-run business in the town of Ba. She married into the family 13 years ago and now manages the general grocery store, which also sells locally caught fresh and frozen seafood. The family also own a fishing boat and a fishing business, which she manages. I asked Priya to explain how their fish business operated, hoping to gain further insights into the fish retail side of fisheries in the area. Priya fell into the owner/operator and middleman (or woman in this case) category of the business. In this situation, Priya provided the appropriate resources, such as the boat, fishing gear, bait, food, and other necessary supplies to fish, while the men (mostly *iTaukei*, some Indo-Fijians) were tasked with fishing and bringing the catch to her. Priya explained that the business operated through an informal labour scheme underpinned by trust rather than a formal job agreement or contracts. I asked her to elaborate on how this trust and mutual agreement scheme worked and was maintained between parties:

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I have to think about the families of my fishing crew as well, they have small children. We have two boats, which are crew-operated through the week, beginning on Monday until they can return with enough catch either on Friday or Saturday. We usually allocate five shares; I take two of those. One for the boat expenses and one for food and other fishing supplies. The remaining three is then divided between the crew members. I normally sell my share of fish from our family-owned retail shop. Some crew members take groceries on credit from the shop and have an account. Usually, the wife is able to take food items on credit for the week, while the husband is away fishing. The husband then repays the weeks debt after getting his share from the fishing trip. In this way, I also benefit, and the crew member and his family also benefit.

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Priya, interview, 4 July 2018

Most fishers got paid upon return from their fishing trips; some took an advance on the money they would have earned from their contractors. In some cases, the amount taken was more than what they earned from fishing, often due to the variability in fish catch numbers and price of fish. Inevitably, these fishers got caught in a debt cycle, as they constantly tried to balance everyday living costs (bills, travel, medical expenses) with their income. Most times there was not enough cash to last the week, and some fishers set up informal credit arrangements with local business operators that allowed a fisher's family to buy necessary food items on credit during the week. This arrangement involves trust and accountability in repaying debts between the fishers and business owners.

Priya explained that the system they had allowed her business to continue while the fisherman was also able to support his family. Although Priya benefited from this informal system, she also saw it as being open to abuse or disloyalty when workers went elsewhere. One requirement of obtaining a fisheries licence is that the boat is manned by a licensed boat captain. In order to maintain a regularly operating fishing business, Priya paid to upskill and train three crew members to obtain boat masters training with the maritime school in Fiji. In addition, she also supported her crew members in paying for insurance that covers search and rescue in case of a tragedy at sea. However, when asked if the crew were considered employees, she stated that it was difficult to employ fishers on a permanent basis as fishing activity is seasonal and weather dependent and had becoming increasingly unpredictable. Thus, fishers could be considered to be working for her but without any formal agreements.

At times, due to the uncertain work conditions and disruptive weather conditions that hindered fishing activities, fishing crew left her fishing business to look for permanent jobs elsewhere or fish for someone else. For Priya and her business, this was not favourable, as she had to constantly spend money paying for training. However, she still would not employ the fishers as staff to eliminate this concern. Such informal work relations highlight the vulnerability of people involved in the fisheries sector in the area. In the absence of formal employment contracts and inaccessibility to other opportunities provided by waged labour, the fishing business is considered highly risky and volatile.

Seema's story

Seema is a 38-year-old woman who shared similar sentiments to Priya in terms of supporting fishermen and their families, particularly the wives and children. She explained: "There isn't much money in the fishing business. We hardly ever make profit, especially these days when the weather conditions are so unpredictable; we are mostly just 'rolling' in this business. Well, however it is, the business is able to support myself, fishers and their families".

Seema says that the money made from fishing is on a rolling basis, explaining that the income received often equalled the expenses incurred. Seema supports her husband by running a fish shop from their family home. Normally, she just bought fish off the fisherman who went fishing on her husband's

boat. She added, “not many people are able to make any profit from this business, yet we are still in this as I see it as a form of support for me and the fishers and their families” (Seema, interview, 4 July 2018).

Naz's story

Naz is a fisherwoman who goes fishing with her husband. I had started talking to her husband, who is also a daytime net fisherman, when he mentioned that Naz was his crew member. Naz was quite happy to share her fishing tales as she hardly had anyone enquire about that before. I was of course very interested and told her it was unusual to hear of Indo-Fijian women engaged in commercial fishing. While she laughed at this remark, Naz was equally serious when she replied that this is what she had to do to support her husband and family.

Apart from saving costs on paying for an extra deckhand, Naz mentioned that fishing kept her active and fit. She added that just as women helped their men work the farm, plant vegetables, harvest, and then sell, in the same way she saw herself going out to sea to fish, clean the fish, and prepare to sell to middlemen. Her usual routine would be to accompany her husband and a crew member for day fishing, using either a handline or net. They would spend five to seven hours out at sea, sometimes longer depending on the amount of catch they had. The one thing she mentioned, which was similar to what was said by the many others I spoke to, was that if they went out they must make sure to come back with catch to sell. The costs they incur prior to a fishing trip must be recovered, and when possible, a profit helps them with the other needs of their household.

These are just three of the women who are inextricably linked to coastal fishing practices in the area. Their roles across the fisheries sector were important in supporting businesses and families.

Conclusion

This article presents just three of the many hundreds of Indo-Fijian women who are part of the coastal fisheries sector in Fiji. It highlights the multiple roles that they perform to support livelihoods and local economies within their communities. These unique experiences of women in such a male-dominated industry would be a fruitful area for further research. Further studies to understand local and context-specific interactions between men and women and women of different ethnicities are essential to understanding women's roles in Fiji's contemporary coastal fisheries sector. As such, these hidden narratives and experiences of Indo-Fijian women would allow for better planning and participation in resource-planning activities within existing community-based natural resource management initiatives in the country.



Indo-Fijian woman fresh fish vendor explaining the fish market supply chain at a local fish shop in Labasa. ©Yashika Nand, WCS

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