

Kastom, gender and economic development: The case of the fish aggregating device in To'abaita, Solomon Islands

Enly Saeni Labuinao¹

Kastom or traditional societies are often portrayed as the root of gender inequalities. Some argue that in order to create gender equality, there is a need to transform from traditional to modern societies. However, I argue that kastom and traditional societies are not necessarily the roots of gender inequality. Rather, gender inequality is a product of the process of change, including neoliberal economic development, which creates new and unequal gender expectations and relationships. This is a complex process of intersections between traditional and modern changes that have resulted in changes to mutual gender responsibilities that were characteristic of traditional societies. I use the case of To'abaita society in Malaita Province, Solomon Islands to show how economic development projects create and perpetuate gender inequalities, and how traditional gender relations influence the processes and outcomes of economic development projects.

Introduction

In the To'abaita language, the terms *wane-wane ni bona'a* and *kini-kini ni bona'a* are used, which are a reference to someone's sex – male and female – rather than gender. While a broad understanding of gender is important (El-Bushra 2000; Momsen 2004), context-specific cases are equally important (Pollard 1997; Dyer 2016).

From May to August 2018, I studied how the use of fish aggregating devices (FADs) as an economic development initiative perpetuates gender inequalities. For centuries, fishermen have known that anything that floats attracts fish. FADs are human-made devices that are either floating or anchored to the sea floor to attract pelagic fish such as tuna (Beverly et al. 2012; Masu and Albert 2017). While my data collection methods are conventional – interviews and participant observation – it is the process of staying and researching within a community that builds trust, understanding and assists researchers to reveal how gender works within local contexts. This research reveals that external projects that are delivered without an in-depth local

understanding of gender relations can exacerbate, rather than improve, gender inequality.

On the surface, this study reveals that women and men report they are happy to have FADs in their community and that they have brought about improvements in household incomes. However, women and men also reported changes in their daily activities that have impacted gender relations. FADs have changed the daily routines of men and have led them to spend more time outside the community. Men are less involved in community tasks and miss important community occasions. Development projects often attempt to address gender through what is sometimes called an “add women and stir” approach. That is, by involving women as participants alongside men, without changing existing practices, development actors are able to report that they have addressed gender in their project. However, this case study reveals that this approach is too simplistic. Gender relations in To'abaita are evolving, and projects introduced without a deep understanding of gender relations in community have the potential to impact negatively on gender relations and worsen gender inequality.

¹ Email: nlysaeni@gmail.com

Children help separate the ropes used as attractants. © WorldFish



Photos of FAD installation and deployment in Afufu, To'abaita, Solomon Islands © Worldfish

A FAD anchor is made from a 200-L fuel drum cut in half and filled with cement.



A FAD anchor is connected to a polypropylene rope.



WorldFish officer and OKRONUS (a community-based organisation aimed at improving resource management in the local communities) explain how to build a FAD floatation device. The name OKRONUS is an acronym for six participating villages (Oibola, Kona, Radefasu, Oneoneabu, Ura, and Sita).



An OKRONUS member explains how to connect the subsurface float.



A WorldFish officer explains how to join the subsurface floats to the ropes.



Women and children help hold the polypropylene rope.



What do men and women think of FADs?

Both women and men expressed their happiness about FAD initiatives in rural areas in relation to income, abundant supply of fish in the villages and at the local markets for food, social gatherings and obligations involving marriage ceremonies, funerals, church anniversaries, and making fish easier to catch (see also Albert et al. 2015). Nearly 80% of interviewees confirmed that money earned from FAD fishing is spent mostly on school fees and food.

Economic dependence

For some, FADs replace gardening; meaning that both husband and wife stop gardening and focus only on fishing at FADs. My study shows that 43% of women interviewed said they quit gardening and concentrated solely on FAD fishing. This dependency, however, lacks sustenance, especially when FADs are broken. One woman confirmed, “When the FAD is broken, it really affects our lives, I find it difficult to earn money, and as a result all my children have to leave school.”

Women's participation

The current FAD programme facilitated by WorldFish and the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources (MFMR) encourages women's participation and involvement. Based on interviews, 87.5% of women said their participation in FADs is minimal. Only 12.5% of women confirmed their participation in the FAD programme, especially with the current FADs that are supported by WorldFish and MFMR.

The interviewees indicated that women's involvement and participation in the FADs programme is new in To'abaita. It is, therefore, challenging when projects such as these try to include and involve women in the process to implement FADs. A female interviewee confirmed:

Our participation in the FAD programme is minimal. However, the approach that WorldFish and MFMR took by bringing everyone together with the inclusion of women ultimately gives us women a sense of belonging. We also enjoyed being part of the programme even though we did not go out fishing at these FADs.

Increased intrahousehold conflict

Respondents also pointed out that FADs created some unfavourable situations within the family and community. They said that some fishermen, after acquiring cash from selling their fish, tended to spend their money on *kwaso* (illegal home-brewed alcohol), which has led to community and family arguments and disturbances.

One interviewee said she witnessed some women disagreeing and scolding their husbands for not catching any fish.

Another woman reported that she was once forced and threatened by her husband to go after one of their younger sons who went out fishing at the FAD during bad weather. She said:

One time I went to the FAD, I went behind one of my sons. He took his dad's canoe and go, and it was bad weather

that time. My husband disagreed with me because I did not stop our son, but I told my husband that I did not know our son is going to the FAD. My husband told me that if our son didn't come back, he will kill me. I heard that, and I took another canoe and went behind our son hand-paddle in the rough sea 2–3 km from the shore. I went and took our son back from the FAD.

Uneven gender division of labour

The research findings from my study reveal that FADs have altered household divisions of labour by affecting the way men and women allocate time between different traditional roles, but have reinforced existing traditional gender roles within the family and community. At the same time, they have increased the burden on women by providing more opportunities for men to pursue their traditional dominant roles while neglecting work in their traditional shared roles. In particular, men spent more times fishing while women did all the household work, especially gardening. The data show that nearly 43% of women interviewees said they engaged in gardening alone without their husbands.

At the community level, men's presence in community work and programmes was limited (also confirmed in Albert et al. 2015). One interviewee mentioned: “You hardly see men in our village during the day; all go out fishing at the FAD.” This means women tend to take up most of the roles and responsibilities in the community.

Decision-making and leadership

In the FAD project, men are at the frontline in decision-making and participation in fishing. Their female counterparts do the cooking, washing, cleaning, gardening and marketing. According to women interviewees, cooking, food preparation, fetching water, taking care of the kids, fish cleaning, marketing, and being responsible for all household chores does not mean that they are marginalised or suppressed in society. They said their roles and responsibilities are equally important to men's roles and responsibilities in society. Keesing (1987) observed a similar pattern in Kwaio on Malaita, Solomon Islands.

International organisations often view this power relation between men and women as discriminatory against women's rights to participation in leadership and decision-making processes in economic development projects. However, in traditional To'abaita society, what is important is the mutual support and relationship between both genders in the roles they play in society.

Interviewees explained that the decision to request a FAD, involvement in making the FAD, and information received about the FAD is passed on through the male leaders who are primarily the decision-makers at the family and community level. Other interviewees highlighted that the nature of the project itself has determined women's involvement in decision-making processes in project development. Women themselves see FADs as men's job.

Women who played certain leadership roles such as collecting data on fish catches from fishing at the FADs,

Photos of FAD installation and deployment in Afufu, To'abaita, Solomon Islands. © Worldfish

An OKRONUS member explains how to connect the ropes.



Men drag the anchor into the sea.



The anchor is pulled by an outboard motor boat with support from the men



Men swim with the anchor to an offshore site.



The anchor is sunk to the sea floor by WorldFish officers and OKRONUS members.



What the FAD looks like once it has been deployed.



attended training and participated during FAD deployment are examples of efforts made by international organisations in encouraging women to participate in economic development projects in rural areas. However, even though they are included and participated in these FADs programmes they remain the minority in decision-making and participation within the programme.

During the installation and deployment of FADs, men were at the front line in facilitating and implementing FAD projects, while women helped with food preparation, cooking, fetching water, and were at the center of household chores. One woman explained:

FAD is men's job. We women our work is to look after our family and household chores (cooking, cleaning, washing, collecting firewood, fetching water, looking after the children, gardening, and marketing). Our common sense told us that FAD is men's job.

At the household level, women individually make most of the decisions about how much to cook, sell, and for how much. However, decisions on matters such as the payment of school fees, or the amount of contributions at weddings, church anniversaries or funerals, are made collaboratively within each family.

Women do most of the selling of the fish within villages, along the road or at local markets. Sometimes during marketing, women may change their prices depending on the demand and supply of fish in the market. Other women confirmed that they have the ultimate decision on deciding which fish to cook for the family and which ones to sell for cash, where to sell and for how much, and decision on how the money is spent, especially when spent on food.

For another woman, decision-making in her family is more collaborative: "*The two of us make decisions as to which fish to sell and money gain from selling the fish. Most of our decisions are made collaboratively.*"

Another woman explains, "*I keep the money, but my husband and I decide together on how to use the money.*"

Most artisanal fishermen mentioned that decisions regarding cash are made collaboratively; they get money to pay for their smokes and fishing gear, while the rest is left for the women to decide on how much to spend on food and other basic needs for the family.

Some women confirmed that men still make the overall decision when it comes to spending money on bigger things like marriages, funerals, church anniversaries, house construction, and school fees but it happens through collaborative discussions. This is the cultural norm in To'abaita. Most men confirmed that they did not keep the money they earned because they are not as good at managing money as women are. Women keep the money and often when the need arises, both men and women decide on how much to use based on a mutual understanding and discussions.

Lessons learned

This study shows that traditional gender roles and responsibilities are often challenging and difficult to change, even for development agencies such as international non-governmental organisations that have substantial leverage because of their sponsorship of economic development projects. In particular, the association of fishing with men,

The FAD floatation device is carried behind the anchor. ©WorldFish



and marketing and gardening with women has been very powerful, and has limited the ability of funding agencies to use FADs to change the power relation between men and women in To'abaita society.

Consequently, economic development and the changes that it engenders has often transformed traditional societies in ways that usually create complex changes, confusing expectations and gender inequalities. It also exacerbates gender inequalities. Moore (2017) highlighted that the intercession and push–pull relationship between *kastom* and modern life styles have led to the creation of new unequal gender roles and expectations today.

This study indicates that greater success in empowering women will arise if future projects focus on the role of women in marketing. This is one area where women already have some power, and where they could be given even more power without transforming existing gender roles and relations.

Conclusion

This study of FADs illustrates that power relations between men and women within families in To'abaita have been very powerful, and in some ways unintentionally reproduced and strengthened by economic development projects, particularly when they have focused on areas where males already possess power according to traditional gender norms. This has challenged development policies for women's empowerment, gender equality and gender-sensitive approaches in economic development initiatives in local communities.

Regardless of the unintended consequences of economic development projects on women's roles and responsibilities, the involvement and participation of women in FAD projects is an improvement on the past where women were completely left out. However, involving women is not enough to bring about improvement in gender relations. The need for an in-depth understanding of local gender relations and being able to contextualise and realise the nature of economic development projects in relation to gender in communities are important to ensuring that both men and women are empowered where they already have some substantial powers rather than transforming existing gender patterns and relations.

References

- Albert J., Albert S., Andrew N., Blanc M., Carlos A., Luda L., Tofuakalo F., Masu R., Oengpepa C., Oeta J., Posala R., Schwarz A-M., Sibiti S., Siota F., Sokimi W., Tan S., Tawaki A., Teri J. and Warren R. 2015. Nearshore fish aggregating devices (FADs) for food security in Solomon Islands. Penang, Malaysia: CGIAR Research Program on Aquatic Agricultural Systems. Program Brief: AAS-2015-05.
- Beverly S., Griffiths D. and Lee R. 2012. Anchored fish aggregating devices for artisanal fisheries in South and Southeast Asia: Benefits and risks. Bangkok, Thailand: Food and Agriculture Organization Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.
- Dyer M. 2016. Men bathe upstream, Women bathe downstream: Gender, natural resource management and development in Solomon Islands. PhD thesis, James Cook University, Townsville, Australia.
- El-Bushra J. 2000. Rethinking gender and development practice for the twenty-first century. *Gender and Development* 1(8):55-62. Retrieved from the web 14 November 2018; available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4030307>
- Keesing R.M. 1987. Ta'a Geni: Women's perspectives on Kwaio Society. p. 33–62. In: Dealing with inequality: Analysing gender relations in Melanesia and beyond. Strathern M. (ed). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Masu R. and Albert J. 2017. Nearshore fish aggregating devices for food security in Solomon Islands. Honiara, Solomon Islands: WorldFish and Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources.
- Momsen J. 2004. Gender and development. London: Routledge.
- Moore C. 2017. Making mala: Malaita in Solomon Islands, 1870s–1930s. The Australian National University: Australian National University Press.
- Pollard A.K. 1997. "KENI NI HA'ANANAUHA: Women: As Givers of Wisdom. Rethinking the changing roles of rural women in Waisisi community (Surairo, Kopo and Hunanahara), Solomon Islands. Thesis, Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia.