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# GENDER ANALYSIS OF THE FISHERIES SECTOR IN THE REPUBLIC OF THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

PREPARED BY MARGARET FOX, NATALIE MAKHOUL AND CAROLINA GARCIA IMHOF

The Pacific Community Division of Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems, and the Division of Human Rights and Social Development under the Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership programme

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# ACRONYMS

<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
<b>CMAC</b>	Coastal Management Advisory Council
<b>COFA</b>	Compact of Free Association
<b>FAME</b>	Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems Division of the Pacific Community
<b>HRSD</b>	Human Rights and Social Development Division of the Pacific Community
<b>GSI</b>	gender and social inclusion
<b>LRC</b>	local resources committee
<b>MCIA</b>	Ministry of Culture and Internal Affairs
<b>MIMRA</b>	Marshall Islands Marine Resources Authority
<b>MICS</b>	Marshall Islands Conservation Society
<b>MSP</b>	MIMRA Strategic Plan
<b>NSP</b>	National Strategic Plan
<b>OIFMC</b>	Outer Islands Fish Market Centers
<b>PAN</b>	Protected Areas Network
<b>PEUMP</b>	Pacific European Union Marine Partnership
<b>RMI</b>	Republic of the Marshall Islands
<b>SPC</b>	Pacific Community
<b>WUTMI</b>	Women United Together Marshall Islands

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The analysis report was a joint effort by Margaret Fox from SPC's HRSD division, and Natalie Makhoul and Carolina Garcia Imhof from SPC's FAME division. Overall fisheries guidance was provided by MIMRA through Ms Florence Edwards and Mr Benedict Yamamura. In addition, assistance was provided by Kathryn Relang, SPC's Country Focal Officer in RMI who supported in-country processes.

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Funding support to plan, prepare and produce this gender analysis report was provided by the European Union and the Government of Sweden under the Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership (PEUMP) programme. Under PEUMP, a holistic approach is applied to ensure that all project-related interventions address cross-cutting topics on poverty reduction, social inclusion, equal access and benefits for women and men, including human rights-based approaches, and participation by youth and marginalised groups. PEUMP, therefore, has an emphasis on mainstreaming gender in its design, implementation and outcomes. This gender and fisheries assessment establishes baseline information that enables mainstreaming requirements for PEUMP's implementing partners and national beneficiary agencies.



# INTRODUCTION

# 01

## Background and rationale

A gender analysis of the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) was primarily conducted for, and with support from, the Marshall Islands Marine Resources Authority (MIMRA). It sheds light on the gender dimensions of the fisheries sector, with a focus on coastal fisheries and aquaculture. This report includes an institutional analysis and capacity assessment of MIMRA as the main fisheries agency responsible for the development and management of the fisheries sector. It also highlights the important role of line ministries and other government agencies in working on gender issues relevant to the fisheries sector. The rationale for this report is to support MIMRA, line ministries and their relevant stakeholders to:

- integrate gender lenses into internal processes such as planning and design, as well as operational activities while implementing activities, and providing fair and inclusive services to coastal communities and other beneficiaries.
- increase their understanding of the different roles of women and men in the fisheries sector, including their different needs, any barriers they may face, and potential opportunities for support based on their different roles and needs.
- assist gender mainstreaming efforts by identifying gaps and opportunities in order to strengthen institutional, policy or capacity frameworks that enable improved mainstreaming.

## Scope and limitations

The gender and fisheries assessment investigates the national environment for integrating gender lenses into fisheries development, focusing in particular on coastal fisheries and aquaculture. It provides an outlook into national fisheries frameworks and their degrees of including gender perspectives. This includes identifying policy gaps and opportunities in line with national gender goals and priorities most relevant to the fisheries sector. An institutional analysis of MIMRA and other relevant organisations completes the picture of the enabling environment for mainstreaming gender by assessing structures, processes, human resources, budget allocations, technical expertise, leadership and political will in progressing gender equality goals in the fisheries sector.

Limited information was available on access to, and roles in, various types of fishing activities, traditional environmental knowledge, and access to training and participation in resource management decision-making. The initial scope included field research to gather first-hand information on the above-listed areas in select communities across the country. However, this was not possible due to travel restrictions to Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) due to COVID-19, and limited in-country capacity to undertake field work. The authors, therefore, relied heavily on available desktop literature and information shared by MIMRA and other stakeholders through email exchanges and Zoom interviews. There is an opportunity to complement this desktop review through in-country field research once travel is feasible. This option will be explored carefully and in close consultations with MIMRA counterparts.

This report supports MIMRA's aspirations to increase its understanding of gender perspectives in the fisheries sector for improved planning, policy development, design and implementation of activities, including improved gender-responsive institutional structures and services.





## METHODOLOGY





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A variety of published information and data sources from government, non-government, intergovernmental agencies and peer-reviewed studies spanning different disciplines – including fisheries, gender, legislation and policies, human and national development, marine resource management, marine ecological studies, nutrition and health – was consulted in this research.<sup>1</sup> For areas where published information was unavailable, unpublished information or information from key informants was sought, with both these information sources cited accordingly within this report.

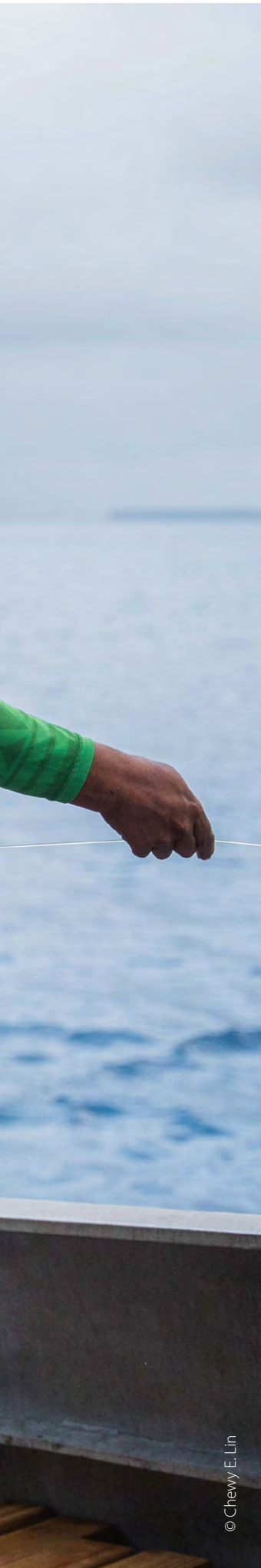
Past gender and fisheries country assessment reports were used to inform this process. In addition, the methodology used by the Pacific Community (SPC) for gender mainstreaming stocktakes at the country level was adapted to inform the sections in this report on institutional and capacity analysis, including the review of the policy framework.

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<sup>1</sup> A list of the sources of information can be found in the Endnote section of this report ([see pages 53-56](#)).

A photograph of two men on a boat, looking out at the ocean. The man in the foreground is shirtless, showing a tattoo on his back. The man in the background is wearing a green and black patterned shirt. The ocean is blue and the sky is overcast. A large blue overlay with the text 'COUNTRY OVERVIEW' and a large '03' is on the right side of the image.

## COUNTRY OVERVIEW



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The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is an independent island country in the Pacific, comprising many atolls, islands and islets (Troubat and Sharp 2021). There are two main atoll chains in RMI: Ratak, or Sunrise, to the east; and Ralik, or Sunset, to the west (Kiste 2022). These two chains differ slightly in their linguistic dialects, but also in land rights systems (Stege 2008). RMI's land area is only 181 km<sup>2</sup>, but its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) extends for 2.1 million km<sup>2</sup> (MIMRA 2019b) (Fig. 1).

In 2019–2020, RMI's population was estimated to be 54,388, consisting of 27,343 female and 27,045 male (EPSSO 2022), and a very low growth rate. Most Marshallese reside in the urban centres of Majuro (56%) and Ebeye (19%), with the remaining 25% living in the outer islands (EPSSO 2022).



**FIGURE 1.** The Republic of the Marshall Islands, with inset maps of Kwajalein, Majuro and Arno atolls.

(Image source: RMI Government – National Strategic Plan 2020–2030)



### 3.1 HISTORY AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

RMI was first inhabited by Micronesians between 500 and 2000 B.C, who called the atolls *Aelon Kein Ad*, meaning Our Islands (Kelin 2003). Following this settlement, it was rediscovered by early Europeans, first by the Spanish in 1529, and later explored or used by navigators from Britain, Russia and the United States (Kelin 2003). It became a German Protectorate in 1898 (Maragos 2011), and by the early 1900s, the administration of RMI was under the Japanese government, who had taken possession of most German territories after World War I (Maragos 2011). The Japanese constructed military infrastructure around the country, which served as a military station during World War II (Maragos 2011; Niedenthal 1997).



Following World War II, RMI was occupied by American forces, and in 1947 it was designated as a United Nations Strategic Trust Territory under the United States (US) government's administration (Niedenthal 1997). The US government also built military bases in the country, turning some islands into nuclear testing areas from 1946 to 1958 (Rose 2022). The socioeconomic and sociocultural section below elaborates on some of the profound impacts caused by these tests.

In 1979, the Marshall Islands became an internally self-governing republic, in which it signed a Compact of Free Association (the Compact) with the US in 1982, subsequently gaining independence in 1986 (Kiste 2022). The Compact was amended in 2004 (Kiste 2022) and will end in December 2023 (Niedenthal 1997). Under the Compact, the US government provides financial and other support, including granting Marshall Islands citizens access to live and work in the US (ADB 2020). In turn, the US remains responsible for external security, and continues to maintain a base and missile testing range on Kwajalein (Kiste 2022).

RMI's Constitution of 1979, as amended, states that "no law and no executive or judicial action shall, either expressly or in its practical application, discriminate any person on the basis of gender" (Constitution, Article 1, Section 12(2)). The Constitution establishes the legislative house, a 33-seat parliament called the *Nitijela*, with an elected president as their head of government (Kiste 2022). In addition to the *Nitijela*, there is also the Council of *Iroij* (Chiefs), which includes 12 tribal chiefs, and has mainly a consultative function regarding traditional laws and customs (Kiste 2022). Both chambers include women, including the first female head of state of any independent country in the Pacific Islands region (ADB 2020). Women's representation in the *Nitijela*, however, remains low, and ambiguity in the legal system, including in the Constitution, can hamper improved participation of women in the public sphere (Stege 2008). The primacy of customary law, even over the Constitution, can also be interpreted as a weak point regarding inclusive participation in decision-making processes (Graham and D'Andrea – submitted for publication).



## 3.2 SOCIOECONOMIC ASPECTS

RMI has a narrow economic base, limited long-term economic growth and low fiscal sustainability, as it is highly reliant on external support under the Compact, and land leases to the US military at Kwajalein (Kiste 2022; RMI Government 2021b). Grants contribute over 35% of the country's gross domestic product (RMI Government 2021b), explaining the importance of the public sector as an economic driver. Other than that, RMI's national economy has been largely driven by oceanic fisheries and transport (ADB 2020).

Considering RMI's small landmass compared to its vast EEZ, the country's reliance on fisheries – both for food security and as an income source – cannot be overstated. The fisheries sector contributed USD 31.3 million to RMI's gross domestic product in 2020 (MIMRA 2020) through revenues from the tuna fishery, including both offshore and land-based activities, with Majuro being the world's busiest tuna transshipment hub (FAO 2021).

The urban economies of Majuro and Kwajalein are mostly driven by government bureaucracy and the Kwajalein military base (RMI Government 2021b). The employment-to-population ratio is higher in urban areas (42.6%) than in rural areas (38.4%), and considerably higher among men (56.4%) than among women (26.7%). In both urban and rural areas, women are more likely to be outside the labour force than men (EPPSO 2022). It is, therefore, unsurprising that the rural



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population's dependence on farming and coastal fisheries is also higher; as a livelihood source, for food security and as part of their cultural heritage. Other economic activities in the outer islands consists mainly of copra and handcraft production, coupled with limited commercial fishing and farming (RMI Government 2021b).

At the consumer level, there is a high reliance on imported goods for food, fuel and other goods, due to the limited ability to produce these commodities locally (RMI Government 2021b). This is particularly concerning in relation to food security, as the population becomes more and more dependent on processed foods, and the quality of diets diminishes. There are simultaneously high levels of obesity and diabetes in RMI, and large numbers of households without access to enough food. Some of the factors that influence this pattern include low productivity of soils, salt and radiation contamination of soils, water limitations, vulnerability to severe weather and climate change, limited infrastructure in most places, overpopulation in major urban centres, and difficult transportation between islands (ADB 2020; Blankenship et al. 2020; Troubat and Sharp 2021). Several social issues are prevalent in certain places, such as violence against women, limited access to education, teenage pregnancy rates and alcohol abuse (Chutaro 2005).

These difficult conditions drive a high level of out-migration from the outer islands to access better economic, education and other opportunities. This is a key driver of excessive population growth on Majuro and Kwajalein atolls (Kiste 2022; RMI Government 2021b), sometimes in settlements highly vulnerable to climate change and natural disasters (Duvat et al. 2017; Giardino et al. 2018). Additionally, significant numbers of Marshallese Islanders have also emigrated to the US for education and economic opportunities (Van Der Geest et al. 2020).

It is important to highlight the lasting impacts of the US nuclear tests, shaping the trajectory of the country up to the present. Consequences include community displacement and high radiation levels in the environment. The displaced communities, in addition to radiation-related health issues, have faced starvation when they were left on atolls where the natural resources were not enough to feed them. Some of them have lost their cultural values and subsistence skills, becoming progressively more dependent on external aid and food (Niedenthal 1997).



### 3.3 SOCIOCULTURAL ASPECTS

With islands of limited productivity and high levels of isolation, Marshallese people have depended on acute navigation and survival skills (Tobin 1956). These skills were passed on through close-knit family and social networks. Land has been the most valuable asset and it is inherited through a complex matrilineal system that aims to ensure that everyone has access to food and basic goods (ADB 2020; Stege 2008).

Traditionally, a piece of land, or *wato*, in the Marshall Islands included the adjacent sea, and was the basis of Marshallese society and it determined the richness of owners. Marshallese society was divided in two classes: the chiefs or *iroij*, who held the primary ownership of land, and the “commoners”, or *kajoor*, who had user rights and secondary ownership. Women in the *iroij* class were called *lerooj*, and had significant power, albeit within certain norms. *Iroij lablab* were the heads of the chiefly class, while *alap* were the heads of the commoner class. The system of inheritance always gave priority to female lineages but had some flexibility. It was common for women to delegate their public power to a male member of their family, but senior women were usually consulted before any major decision (Stege 2008; Tobin 1956).

Colonial rule and the introduction of a cash economy changed the sociocultural makeup of RMI on some islands more than others. For example, under German rule, the introduction of commercial copra production changed the relationships between the two classes (chiefs and commoners) and the value concept of the land. Later, the Japanese took away community rights over the sea and uninhabited islands, by declaring that all marine areas belonged to their government; this claim continued under the US rule. The US military presence and associated aid determined for many people a radical change in their diet and economic relations. Out-migration from remote islands to urban centres – driven by nuclear tests, economic opportunities, political change and climate change – has resulted in overpopulation of some areas and depopulation of others (Stege 2008; Tobin 1956).

While the matrilineal system is still intact on most islands, it is becoming obsolete in the face of new migration patterns. As a result, land ownership rules are continuously changing and diversifying. At higher political levels, more women have taken on a public role. For example, some women have been elected to Parliament (including the former president), and several female chiefs have been part of the Council of Iroij, where sometimes there are roughly equal numbers of men and women members. This latter Council has an important role regarding traditional law, including land heritage and land management (Stege 2008).





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A photograph of a person with dark hair and sunglasses, wearing a light blue shirt, looking out over a vast blue ocean. In the distance, several small, green islands are visible on the horizon under a clear sky. The person is positioned on the deck of a white boat, with parts of the boat's structure and equipment visible in the foreground.

## **GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT SITUATION IN RMI**

04

This section provides a summary of gender issues to better understand the bigger picture between gender and development in RMI, as well as changes of gender roles and associated issues from the past to today's emerging issues. The relevance to fisheries is highlighted regarding national priorities and needs. RMI's key commitments towards gender equality are presented with a focus on understanding their relevance for the fisheries sector.



## 4.1 A SNAPSHOT OF GENDER ROLES AND ISSUES IN MARSHALLESE TRADITIONAL AND MODERN SOCIETY

RMI's mostly matrilineal society grants women a high status in the community (Stege 2008). Traditionally, women's authority and leadership roles were described as a powerful "shadow government" (Hezel n.d. as cited in Stege 2008). The status of women did not compete with men's roles and powers because their relationship was complementary, working together towards one benefitting goal – a concept enshrined in Marshallese society and commonly found in Micronesian value systems (Stege 2008). Despite the matrilineal inheritance system, women have had limited authority to control and exercise their land rights because this has gradually been delegated to men (RMI Government 2015a). A matrilineal society, however, does not necessarily mean that it is progressive with regards to gender equality, albeit it can facilitate norms of shared and balanced powers as opposed to colonial systems of disempowerment of women. The once-vested powers of women as landowners, decision-makers, peacekeepers and leaders have gradually become diluted and passed on to their brothers or other male relatives (Curtis 1992). Consequently, their once highly respected roles as nurturers and life givers have steadily narrowed down to simply caretakers for children and other relatives. Some reasons for the erosion of women's high status and powers are associated with the adoption of introduced gender roles and the accompanying idea of a strict labour division between women and men by allocating household-related tasks to women while men work outdoors. Other factors that contribute to the reduction of women's authority are lifestyle changes related to urbanisation and out-migration (UN Women 2022) as they move away from their traditional systems of lineage (Hezel 2001) coupled with the influences of Christianity and its teachings that women should be submissive to men, which has further restricted women to a more domestic life (Kattil De-Brum, 2018).

While international frameworks on gender equality provide a minimum set of standards and guidance to achieve equality across a wide spectrum of topics, there is flexibility in adapting them to the local context. Today, RMI's focal areas to progress gender equality are heavily influenced by the country's socioeconomic landscape, which offers limited private sector development, hardship related to poverty risks, food security concerns and social pressure from traditional lifestyles competing with adaptation needs to modern realities. Geographical remoteness, limited land mass, out-migration, and emerging environmental threats further exacerbate gender inequalities; for example, by eroding women's authority over their land ownership rights as they become more separated from their lineage through out-migration (Hezel 2001).





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According to a report by the Asian Development Bank (2020), the three most challenging areas with a slow uptake on enhancing gender equality in RMI are:

### 1. Gender-based violence

- Mostly experienced as intimate partner violence by 51% of women, and high rates of violence against children, with boys (62%) and girls (61%) experiencing nearly equal degrees of physical violence.
- High rates of teenage pregnancies and associated social stigma for girls.
- Increased risks for women and girls of sexual exploitation and violence related to an influx of foreign fishing vessels and associated human trafficking risks.

### 2. Women's participation in the economy

- Employment-to-population ratio is much higher among men (56.4%) than among women (26.7%), with more women of working age being outside the labour force<sup>2</sup> at 72.1% compared to 39% of men (EPPSO 2022).
- Nationally, gender pay gap stands at -13.8% in favour of women. With female employees in urban areas having a higher average monthly wage than their male counterparts. In rural areas, however, men still earn more than women (EPPSO 2022).
- Women and girls face additional obstacles to access higher profile jobs at senior levels, employment in non-traditional male-dominated sectors and technical vocational and education training pathways coupled with underlying risks of gender-based discrimination such as sexual harassment, security concerns or time-burden due to women's multiple responsibilities at home and in their communities.
- Poverty rate is slightly higher for people living in female-headed households than male-headed households, regardless of location. Approximately one-third of people in RMI live in female-headed households, with 9% of these households living in poverty compared to 7% in male-headed households (EPPSO 2022).
- Legal frameworks to accommodate gender-specific labour laws and social protection are weak, and, at the same time women's awareness of their rights at work is low.

<sup>2</sup> The population outside the labour force is defined as people who are neither employed nor unemployed, including students, the elderly, and those engaged in unpaid household or family duties.

### 3. Women in decision-making roles and in roles of power and influence

- RMI made history in 2016 by electing its first female head of state, which can be viewed as a progressive step to improve women's political participation, but the overall representation of women in political decision-making roles and on public boards remains low compared with international rates.
- Despite being a matrilineal society, roles of power and influence at the local and national level have significantly shifted towards men through the custom of delegation of duties. Women, especially young ones, are less aware of their land rights and clanship relationships.

Positive progress has been made to achieve gender parity for boys and girls, and women and men in the education sector, with equal enrolment of boys and girls increasing over time and near universal access to elementary education (RMI Government 2018). RMI has also made significant progress in adopting laws that respect, protect and aim at achieving gender equality, such as the Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Act of 2011, the Child Rights Protection Act 2015 and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2015 with reference to gender, and the 2019 Gender Equality Act.

### Relevance to RMI's fisheries sector

The fisheries sector is one of the key sectors driving RMI's economic growth (RMI Government 2020). Understanding and integrating gender perspectives is, therefore, key to ensuring that the fisheries sector provides equitable benefits for all.

Some programmes<sup>3</sup> driven by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Commerce have focused on the promotion of local products and goods from canoe builders and handicraft makers, and traditional foods from farmers and fishers from all atolls. These initiatives allowed significant income flow that mostly benefitted rural women (Kattil De-Brum 2018).

Access to, and control over, land and marine areas for women and girls (especially in the outer islands) continues to be an important condition for acquiring natural resources, and ensuring food security and secure housing (RMI Government 2018). The weakening of women's land rights can have effects on marine tenure and may result in challenging impacts for women who rely on marine or terrestrial resources for food, medicine, handicrafts, or local construction materials. Furthermore, decision-making related to marine resource access, use and management often lacks women's voices because decision-making is dominated by men who are considered to be family heads and leaders, and are, therefore, decision-makers (Graham and D'Andrea – submitted for publication).

Further, product development is an area that could boost the local economy and reduce export dependencies. Preserved fish is one potential local product identified by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Commerce (RMI Government undated), and is in line with aspirations for more value-adding opportunities that should include women as key players, particularly in post-harvest activities in the small-scale fisheries sector, including value chains. The RMI government, in its recently endorsed Economic Policy statement, highlights the need to investigate women's low participation in the formal economy, and calls for a better understanding of root causes to address these for "truly inclusive livelihood opportunities" (RMI Government 2019). Women's roles in coastal fisheries and aquaculture are rarely documented, and one can assume that women's contributions towards family wellbeing, food security and income from fishing would mainly be informal.

With Majuro being the world's busiest tuna transshipment hub, and with further ambitions to strengthen its capacity, there is significant potential for more employment opportunities on fishing vessels; and along onshore operations, these will require strategic action to enable jobs for local men and women, and to address gender stereotypes, bias,

<sup>3</sup> "One Island, One Product", 2017 and "Be Marshallese, Buy Marshallese", 2015





and gendered specific barriers such as safety concerns to create fair and inclusive opportunities. With women's gross earnings from fisheries being higher than that of men in 2017 (RMI Government 2018), it can be assumed that women are already engaged in, and skilled at, taking on employment opportunities in male-dominated areas and senior management roles.

Women and children are at risk of experiencing sexual, physical and emotional violence from visiting seafarers, and need a better connection to existing protection services for victims of violence that include fisheries agencies as a stakeholder. Current protection systems do not always reach port areas, and those involved may not be aware of the degree of violence within the seafaring community, while the added stigma and sensitivity for women in this area can be seen as an obstacle in accessing protection services. There is evidence that organised prostitution, human trafficking of local women and girls, and their involvement in drinking activities create social impacts that affect the most marginalised individuals in society (see Vunisea 2006). These activities are often associated with social stigma, while also putting those impacted at greater health risks, including from sexually transmitted infections (Tuara 2006). In 2018, the Committee of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) pointed at RMI as being a destination country for human trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced prostitution, including on foreign vessels and in onshore establishments. Pregnant women were also at risk for being trafficked abroad, being compelled to give up their children for adoption (CEDAW Committee 2018).

Climate change and increasing natural hazards have different impacts on women and men. According to Dankelman (2002) and Erman et al. (2021), there needs to be more understanding of the gendered roles, needs and impacts regarding disaster risk reduction, and for these dimensions to be included in disaster risk reduction strategies by policy-makers. Additionally, fisheries-related considerations are often left out of such strategies and need to be included due to how climate change impacts natural resources, including the associated risks it has on food security. The loss of and damage to RMI's natural resources during the 2015–2016 El Niño event, combined with the drought that followed in 2016, affected women and men and their fishing and food security severely. The drought decreased agricultural production and placed immense pressure on men who are the main traditional



fishers and suppliers of protein from the sea. As a result, men had to travel farther and spend more time fishing. Women felt the pressure as they struggled to secure adequate and nutritious food for their family, and had to rely more on cash for imported and processed foods. At the same time, women's income from handicraft sales were reduced due to the impact of the drought on pandanus plants (Green Climate Fund 2019). These gendered impacts from natural hazards have highlighted the importance of nature conservation for outer island women, as these are necessary for handicraft production (Kattil De-Brum 2018) and food security. Because women engage in seafood preservation, such as salting fish, such an activity can play a crucial part in disaster preparedness because fish are a key protein source.

Promoting local fish and seafood, enabling a sustainably managed small-scale fishery, and ensuring that support services for livelihood development and the subsistence sector trickle down to women and men equally is also important, considering the increase in diet-related unhealthy lifestyles and increased food insecurity. Findings from the 2019/2020 Household Income and Expenditure Survey revealed that access to safe and nutritious food remains a serious challenge for the Marshallese (Troubat and Sharp 2021). More than one out of four women of reproductive age are affected by anaemia; growing child malnutrition is becoming a source of concern; and a dependence on freely shared foods is felt more strongly by female-headed households. Households engaged in fishing showed more resilience to overcoming food insecurity and have access to better and more affordable and sufficient protein sources (mainly reef fish) to meet the different dietary needs of children and women, including lactating and pregnant women (Troubat and Sharp 2021).



## 4.2 RMI'S INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL COMMITMENTS TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY, AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO FISHERIES

RMI has ratified several core international human rights treaties (SPC and OHCHR 2020) that include provisions to advance gender equality. CEDAW, ratified in 2006, is the key treaty for the advancement of women's rights.

CEDAW provides minimum standards to advance women's rights in all sectors and at all levels, but Article 14 is more specific to agriculture and fisheries, as it refers to certain problems faced by rural women. The article calls upon states to ensure rural women's right to participate in, and benefit from, rural development. This requires the state to establish an enabling institutional, legal and policy framework in the fisheries sector, which is gender responsive and adequately resourced (CEDAW Committee 2016). Albeit not binding, this article refers to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines). In this context, gender equality gains more importance as a key principle to not only include and promote the role of women in SSF contexts, but also to apply gender lenses at the policy level while aiming for transformative changes. In addition to a dedicated chapter on gender equality (see Chapter 8 in FAO, 2015), a set of references and calls for actions are included throughout the SSF guidelines, such as on gender and tenure rights, gender and post-harvest chains, violence against women in small-scale fisheries communities, or the need to collect sex-disaggregated data.

Another key issue addressed in CEDAW Art. 14<sup>4</sup> is the right of rural women to participate in decision-making in the political and public life of the country, and in community-level discussions, an important concern in RMI. Representation does not only refer to political decision-making, but also to roles of power and influence such as fisheries extension

<sup>4</sup> CEDAW Art. 14 para. 2(a) and 2(f) read alongside article 7

services, civil servant work, cooperatives, community elders' councils, farmer associations for mariculture, and at within a local resources committee (LRC). An LRC is the responsible body overseeing the decision-making and running of a community's resources management plan.

Further, the CEDAW Committee considers women's rights to land and natural resources in the fisheries sector as fundamental human rights. Thus, discriminatory laws, cultural attitudes and practices are considered in violation with the convention. As explained earlier, different factors threaten the traditional land and sea tenure rights of Marshallese women.

As part of RMI's state obligations to adopt Art. 14 into the national legal and policy framework, it must: 1) enhance women's roles in fisheries and aquaculture; 2) increase their knowledge and awareness of the sustainable use of fishery resources; and 3) consider affirmative actions, such as temporary special measures (e.g. quotas) to allow equitable benefits from fisheries. A positive example of MIMRA using affirmative actions is the mandatory requirement that there be women and youth representatives in LRCs under their national framework for community-based resources management, referred to as the Reimaanlok process.

At the regional level, RMI is a signatory to the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration (PLGED) (2012) and the Pacific Platform for Action and Advancement of Women and Gender Equality (PPA) (2018–2030). The latter was adopted in 1994 as the Pacific region's contribution at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), and included 13 critical areas, one of which was agriculture and fishing. The PPA is aligned with the PLGED, a high-level declaration that reinforces the commitment of Pacific leaders to progress with gender-responsive government programmes, including fisheries. Another PLGED key area with high relevance to the fisheries sector is the commitment to progress women's economic empowerment through a set of recommended actions, such as improved market access for local produce and targeted support for women entrepreneurs in the informal and formal sectors.



## 4.3 NATIONAL FRAMEWORKS ADVANCING GENDER GOALS AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO FISHERIES

The RMI government places great emphasis on its people, as seen in its development agenda, as outlined in the National Strategic Plan (NSP) 2020–2030, where human development, social capital and wealth are the main parameters for the country's development. The NSP has five strategic pillars that are guided by the overall objective of "sustainable, equitable and measurable development". Gender equality is a guiding principle, suggesting that it is not a stand-alone goal but an integral component for all five pillars. More specifically, gender equality is strongly reflected in pillar one, Social and Culture, under its strategic area of Social Justice and Inclusion, with the goal: "Equality, Justice and Empowerment for All". Direct reference to gender equality and social inclusion (GSI) themes can also be found in other pillars and their strategic areas. For example, pillar four – Economic Empowerment – includes a direct objective to promote women entrepreneurs, while other references are less direct, emphasising ideas of fairness and inclusion more generally.

RMI's National Gender Mainstreaming Policy (2015) calls for a strategic action to "identify markets and support the development of value-chains for agriculture and fisheries outputs produced by women". This in turn will enable "women's equitable participation in, and benefit from, economic development" (RMI Government 2015b). In addition, the policy states that women's and men's contributions to fisheries requires promotion and support because their gendered roles



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contribute towards food security and rural development.<sup>5</sup> The gender policy has not been renewed because of the adoption of the Gender Equality Act in 2019; however, its content is still being referred to in national strategic documents, so it can be assumed that the policy still serves as a guiding document alongside the act.

The 2019 Gender Equality Act is a legally binding instrument to enhance women's and girls' human rights and their entitlement to substantive equality. It calls on state agencies to incorporate CEDAW into national laws and policies, and includes the convention's guidelines and recommendations. The act promotes gender mainstreaming across all sectors, including fisheries, and at all levels. A strong theme within the act is the call for the adoption of special measures to counterbalance the under-representation of women and girls in public, political and economic realms, especially in decision-making processes. Although the act does not refer to fisheries specifically, it calls for equal participation opportunities in disaster risk management activities, and for the collection of sex-disaggregated data on the impacts of natural disasters and climate change. The section on employment prohibits gender discrimination, and provides gender-specific labour rights and entitlements. However, it fails to include such provisions for informal labour, in which women are dominantly involved, such as subsistence fishing and small-scale commercial and related pre- and post-harvest activities. The act just acknowledges additional needs for women in the informal economy and calls for the promotion of women's economic empowerment through a range of support services. Despite the act's progressive agenda, its implementation is weak, and the procedures for its enforcement through additional regulations are vague and open. There is also no reference to the use, access and control over natural resources, nor does it cover more specific fisheries-related topics.

<sup>5</sup> See page 14 of RMI's National Gender Mainstreaming Policy, Priority Outcome 4





## OVERVIEW OF RMI'S FISHERIES **SECTOR AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR WOMEN AND MEN**

05

RMI and its people have had a historical and intricate cultural association with their ocean. Historically, the Marshallese have relied on seafood for their sustenance, which is evident in the numerous references regarding sailing and navigation, and fish and fishing in their traditional stories and legends (Kelin 2003).

To date, the marine environment and its resources continue to sustain RMI's population, with the 2019/2020 Household Income and Expenditure Survey results indicating that meat and fish are the most consumed protein sources, with higher rates of fish consumption reported by rural households, due to their stronger reliance on fishing and agriculture (Troubat and Sharp 2021). Furthermore, the fisheries sector is pivotal to the nation's economy, employing 10% of workers in the country (FAO 2021).

RMI's fisheries sector encompasses two main areas:

- Inshore or coastal fisheries and aquaculture, which include community-based projects and ventures; and
- Offshore fisheries, which revolve mostly around the tuna fishing industry – one of the main revenue sources for the country.

MIMRA is the regulatory body entrusted with managing RMI's fisheries, including the coastal and offshore sectors within the country's EEZ (MIMRA 2019b). MIMRA functions as a semi-autonomous agency within the Ministry of Natural Resources and Commerce (MIMRA 2020), and is governed by a board of directors, with a director and two deputy directors in its senior leadership.

There are five divisions within MIMRA: Coastal and Community Affairs; Oceanic and Industrial Affairs; Legal; Finance and Corporate Services; and the newly established Competent Authority Division (MIMRA 2020). In addition to these divisions, there are other key programmes and partnerships that MIMRA undertakes, including: the MIMRA Internship Programme; the RMI Protected Areas Network; and the World Bank-supported Pacific Islands Regional Oceanscape Programme.



## 5.1 COASTAL FISHERIES AND AQUACULTURE SECTOR AND THEIR GENDER DIMENSIONS

While subsistence coastal fishery continues to be a mainstay for most fisheries-dependent communities, various fisheries development initiatives have been undertaken to support rural outer island communities in earning a livelihood from fishing (Edwards 2021) where limited economic activities exist (RMI Government 2021b). RMI's coastal fisheries economy was developed in the late 1980s through the deployment of fish aggregation devices, and later diversified to include the Outer Island Fish Market Centers, aquaculture and other initiatives, such as community-based fisheries management (Edwards 2021; MIMRA 2020; Pinca et al. 2009). A 2009 study by Gillett estimated that 75% of coastal catches was for subsistence (in Gillett 2009, as cited in Gillett 2016), and in 2014, coastal subsistence catches were estimated at 3000 mt, with an approximate value of USD 6 million per year (Gillett 2016).





### 5.1.1 MARINE HARVESTING, AQUACULTURE AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Both men and women are involved in fishing and harvesting coastal marine resources, with women more involved in post-harvest, processing and marketing (Tuara 1998). However, culturally delineated gendered roles regarding marine harvesting activities exist (Tuara 1998), particularly in RMI's outer islands. In the past, women's harvesting activities were limited to lagoon and inner reef areas as it was culturally considered taboo for women to go out on boats or engage in diving, netting, trapping, pole-and-line fishing or longlining (Tuara 1998). Men, in contrast, were not subjected to these limitations (Lambeth et al. 2014; Tuara 1998). The reasons behind these prohibitions for women include the belief that:

- 1) women brought bad luck and so their presence on a fishing boat would prevent a good catch;
- 2) women could not handle being on boats;
- 3) women's family obligations at the home prevented them from joining any fishing ventures;
- 4) women do not possess the required strength needed for more physical activities; and
- 5) women's clothing prevented them from joining fishing ventures.

Given these beliefs, it was the men who primarily landed fish and invertebrates, while women were more involved in secondary or post-harvest components of the coastal fishery (Pinca et al. 2009; Tuara 1998).

Limited information exists on women's fishing activities, with a few accounts captured by Tuara (1998) in the 1990s and by Pinca et al. (2009) in 2007, with a strong suggestion that not much has changed. The study by Tuara (1998) was conducted in Majuro and the six outer islands of Arno, Wotje, Erikub, Ailuk, Ebon and Namdrik. Women focused on collecting shellfish such as cowries, topshells, clams and trochus, as well as crustaceans, such as crabs, and other invertebrates mainly for home consumption and to make handicrafts and jewellery (Tuara 1998). A number of women were also engaged in clam farming, with some periodically involved in bottom fishing during recreational fishing competitions (Tuara 1998). Men on the other hand, were mainly focused on catching fish and in Wotje and Erikub atolls, they also harvested sea turtles (Tuara 1998). Like women's catches, men's catches were mostly for consumption, but at times in Ailuk Atoll, fish were dried and salted for sale at Majuro and Kwajalein<sup>6</sup> (Tuara 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Kwajalein is an atoll with Ebeye as its urban centre.



**TABLE 1.** Summary of women's activities in the late 1990s across the coastal fisheries value chain in RMI.

Activity	Constraints	Areas for development
<b>Harvesting activities:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women mostly harvested shellfish including cowrie, topshell, clam, trochus, and crustaceans</li> <li>Some women engaged in aquaculture activities such as clam farming</li> <li>Culturally taboo for Marshallese women to engage in diving, netting, trapping, pole-and-line fishing or longlining</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No dedicated fish or seafood market on Majuro<sup>7</sup></li> <li>Declining marine resources around Majuro</li> <li>Competition between Majuro-based women and those in the outer islands for selling handicrafts</li> <li>Limited markets</li> <li>Lack of information on services available to women (e.g. loans)</li> <li>Lack of women's fisheries projects</li> <li>No provision of support (e.g., no training or equipment)</li> <li>Transportation: High costs and/or irregular from outer islands to take produce to sell at markets (i.e. cannot market produce regularly)</li> <li>Difficult to acquire bank loans as income from fishing or agriculture could not be used to guarantee repayments</li> </ul>	<b>Training requirements:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seafood hygiene, handling, maintaining seafood quality</li> <li>Setting up small-scale, income-generating ventures</li> <li>Novel methods of shell craft, including pearl-oyster shell cleaning and drilling</li> </ul> <b>Development interests:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Set up a seafood market</li> <li>Provide support services to women involved in fisheries</li> <li>Research overseas markets for shell craft</li> <li>Processing local fish for export</li> <li>Pearl oyster hatchery</li> <li>Aquaculture ventures including shrimp farm, pearl oyster, clams and marine sponges</li> </ul>
<b>Processing:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Processing including gutting, scaling, cleaning, cooking, salting, smoking, and drying of seafood fish and shellfish, is mainly done by women</li> <li>Making shell craft is popular and usually sold for income</li> </ul>		
<b>Marketing:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women must sell their produce through stores and other outlets due to the absence of a fish market</li> <li>Fresh and processed fish and shellfish (clams) sold at local stores and at the roadside</li> <li>Shell craft sold at handicraft outlets on Majuro</li> </ul>		

Source: Tuara 1998

<sup>7</sup> There was no dedicated fish or seafood market when this study was undertaken in the 1990s, but there are now fish markets in Ebeye and Majuro.

A survey conducted a decade later by Pinca et al. (2009) found some changes to these harvesting and marketing activities due to fisheries development interventions, such as improved market access, particularly on Ailuk and Arno atolls. The following activities were recorded by Pinca et al. (2009) for Likiep, Ailuk and Arno atolls:

- i. Both men and women harvested fish and invertebrates, with men usually accounting for most of the fish and invertebrate catches by wet weight;
- ii. Men fished more frequently than women, with their catch designated for both food and income, while women's catch was mostly for household consumption;
- iii. Women harvested fish only in sheltered coastal reefs and lagoons while men targeted a variety of habitats, including sheltered coastal reefs and lagoons, outer reefs and passages;
- iv. Gleaning for invertebrates on the reef-tops and intertidal flats, including soft-benthos areas was usually undertaken by women, with men also, but rarely, partaking in this activity;
- v. For invertebrate collection, men mostly dived for lobsters, clams or octopus and, to a lesser extent, other invertebrates;
- vi. Women still did not target the outer reef and passages, nor did they participate in any diving activities;
- vii. Women did not dive but at times extended their invertebrate collections to deeper areas by wading out to ankle- and shoulder-deep waters;
- viii. Increased commercialisation of coastal marine resources due to more fisheries development interventions, resulting in the increased trade of fresh reef fish, and the establishment of a giant clam hatchery for the aquarium trade in Arno.

It was only in Laura (located at the western tip of Majuro Atoll) where men were still responsible for all commercial fishing of fish and invertebrates, while the only reference to women's involvement was in the harvesting of invertebrates for home consumption (Pinca et al. 2009). Recent information indicates that men still dominate Laura's marine harvesting activities judging by the absence of women in fisheries-related community consultations, despite invitations for all fishers to attend irrespective of gender. Women's absence from these discussions could be attributed to their gendered roles that focus on post-harvest processing and agricultural activities.

With the exception of Laura, which is peri-urban, the other three sites are located in the outer islands where women's participation in fishing activities appeared to be more diverse, which suggests a shifting perception of gendered roles in fisheries. This includes women who harvested finfish. An interesting finding is the fact that women did not dive for fish or invertebrates, but are beginning to venture beyond their traditional fishing areas into deeper waters to fish. It can be assumed that the lack of diving skills or lack of access to diving gear, coupled with the pre-existing stigma regarding women's ability to fish, may continue to hinder women from harvesting invertebrates and fish in deeper waters. Another consideration that needs to be considered is environmental change and the impacts on fish and invertebrate populations in shallow waters. A perceived decline in species that are targeted by women may have already affected, or will affect, women's subsistence catches and will force women to venture out farther to fish. Thus, more investment needs to be made to support the extension of women's fishing practices (e.g. access to and use of fishing gear, training in new fishing techniques that include diving, and dispelling preconceptions about what women are capable of, while also ensuring that these activities are sustainable and do not exacerbate species decline).

Today, more women engage in fishing competitions, including bottom fishing and trolling, a fishing activity that women traditionally did not participate in. It is important to highlight this change, given the limitations on women to engage in such fishing activities in the past. Fishing competitions include women and men who may be working together in the spirit of Marshallese values of team work to achieve one goal. Such competitions can also help to break down gender biases and introduce women to new fishing activities, including using other types of gear and operating an





outdoor motor. However, more information is needed to assess whether women are willing to participate in these activities outside of these competitions. Such activities may also support food security and income-generation needs.

Fish aggregating devices (FADs) have been deployed at select sites to enhance catches for local fishers (Edwards 2021; MIMRA 2019a; Pinca et al. 2009). While sex-disaggregated information on the users and beneficiaries of these FADs is unavailable, men are the primary users of these FADs given their fisheries gendered roles. Some women also benefit indirectly when they sell fish caught by men fishing at FADs. Furthermore, it is important to holistically analyse the benefits of FADs for households, as increased catches by men supports food security and decreases dependence on store-bought processed foods for protein (Troubat and Sharp 2021). Considering the role of women in the context of food security, they need to be included as a key stakeholder in FAD development programmes.

Aquaculture production consists of a relatively steady but small production of giant clams, hard and soft corals for the aquarium trade, sporadic production of black pearls (Gillett 2016), and more recently, a *moi* (*Polydactylus sexfilis*) rearing programme (MIMRA 2020). MIMRA has played a key role in these ventures as they have an aquaculture programme that aims to support food security, employment and stock enhancement (Edwards 2021). The giant clam *Tridacna maxima* is the main species cultivated by outer island farmers and MIMRA, with some hatcheries distributing seed to trained farmers (Edwards 2021; MIMRA 2020). More than 260 farmers have been supported, and some of them earned over USD 6000 in 2019 from sales to Majuro-based export companies (MIMRA 2019b). Women are likely involved in these ventures, but little information is available. Likiep has an established farmers association, Likiep Atoll Aquaculture Cooperative (Edwards 2021); members include women, although their role is unclear. Over time, MIMRA has been expanding its work in aquaculture but the participation of women, men and youth is not clearly indicated, particularly for the outer islands. There is scope to investigate women and youth participation, either as farmers or as part of a farming family model or part of the overall value chain.

As an adaptation strategy for living on a small land area with scarce resources, Marshallese communities have employed traditional systems governing ownership of land and associated coastal areas, coupled with certain



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restrictions to counter unsustainable harvesting of important marine resources. Land ownership through land parcels (*wato*) encompasses both land and adjacent coastal areas including resources situated within these spaces (Stege 2008). Previously, the *iroij* (chiefs described in Chapter 3) were instrumental in implementing and enforcing sustainable harvesting practices to protect local food security through traditional conservation measures (Baker et al. 2011). One such practice was the *mo*, a system that restricted access to designated areas of land, a whole island, or reefs, with access only permitted following special approval from the *iroij* (Baker et al. 2011). Other measures, including seasonal harvesting restrictions, size limits and prohibitions on taking gravid females also existed (Baker et al. 2011). These practices are commendable, but the social impacts in relation to different hierarchies, genders or age groups remains unclear, including how it equitably addresses local food security needs.

Despite the presence of *watos*, decision-making powers regarding access and usage of coastal resources, including fisheries prohibitions, are no longer solely determined by this. Local governments now have jurisdiction over resources within five nautical miles of its shores, with decisions being made under the guidance of traditional leaders or *iroij* (Baker et al. 2011). Given that positions in local government and chiefly roles are predominately held by men, few women participate in these higher-level, decision-making processes although they are impacted by the outcomes of these decisions.

Due to other changes over time, including the erosion of certain traditional management practices, the Reimaanlok National Conservation Area Plan (Reimaanlok Plan) was developed with an accompanying 8-Step Reimaanlok Framework to support community-based resource management, including coastal fisheries resources, and garner assistance from the Protected Areas Network (Hess et al. 2012; Reimaan National Planning Team 2008). The Reimaanlok mechanism supports local governments in formulating fishery management plans and ordinances, as well as harmonising efforts to streamline the effective implementation of community fisheries management programmes nationally (Baker et al. 2011; Hess et al. 2012). One key principle of the Reimaanlok approach is to empower local communities, including men, women and youth, in sustainably managing their local ecosystem by having representatives of these different social groups within each community's LRC, with the most vocal women usually nominated into these committees.



While having diverse representation within an LRC is a great first step, it needs to be further ascertained whether committee diversity equates to diverse voices and meaningful participation in decision-making processes, and does not unintentionally place social norms at a disadvantage.

Additionally, the Marshallese have great respect for their male and female elders. Youth are often reluctant to openly share their perspectives on fisheries management during meetings, particularly in the presence of elders.<sup>8</sup> Given RMI's youthful population that has a tendency towards out-migration, their meaningful participation within the Reimaanlok process is vital in generating their "buy-in" and interest in coastal fisheries management and associated traditional knowledge. If youth feel they are meaningfully engaging in discussions, this may help prevent them from leaving rural islands for urban centres or overseas. More than just improved youth engagement, it is also crucial to consider sustainable food-security and livelihood opportunities from coastal resources with youth fishers as a target group in mind, while also fulfilling the 11 principles of the National Youth Policy. These principles include "Youth capacity development, participation and youth voice" with a vision to "help make their islands safer and cleaner places for people to live" (RMI Government 2021a).

Some of RMI's coastal fisheries catch-and-income data have been recorded and conveyed over the years, including through MIMRA's annual reports. These data, however, usually focus on certain commercially important fish and farmed marine invertebrates, which men are more likely to engage in, while there is a dearth of information on the species that women harvest, particularly for shell craft jewellery. Given the importance of the shell craft sector to RMI's outer island communities, it is imperative for fisheries stakeholders to collect and share information on the types and volume of seashells targeted; the different social groups (e.g. women, men, young, elderly) involved in the harvests; impacts of these harvests on the marine ecosystem; and economic value in the handicraft sector or elsewhere. Future development opportunities to advance this sector, including aquaculture options, need to be assessed. Concerns regarding the potential overharvesting of shells for the handicraft sector has also been echoed in a yet-to-be published study<sup>9</sup> titled *Gendered value chain and market assessment of Marshallese handicrafts*, with the following relevant recommendations (Huffer and Flood – in review):

- determine the abundance of seashells used for handicrafts;
- support the revival of pearl jewellery in Namdrik as a means for diversification of raw materials, and to reduce pressure on wild stocks;
- MIMRA to work with Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI), Jibron Ae and the Marshall Islands Handicraft Business Association (MIHAB) to deliver information sessions on the lifecycle and sustainable management of seashells to artisans and communities; and
- consider potential use of the renovated MIMRA facility for regeneration of cowrie populations.

### 5.1.2 POST-HARVEST ACTIVITIES AND TRADE

In line with the Pacific Island region's trend, Marshallese women focus more on post-harvesting activities than harvesting activities within the coastal fisheries sector. Some of the primary post-harvesting activities that women undertake include gutting, scaling and cleaning fish and shellfish, which they, or members of their household, harvested for home consumption or for sale (Tuara 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Youth perspective discussions during the CBFM Micronesia Sub-regional Workshop, 2021 – RMI Breakout Group.

<sup>9</sup> This assessment was undertaken to support women's economic empowerment for Marshallese women involved in the handicraft sector and was conducted independently of MIMRA or any other fisheries development agencies.

Some secondary post-harvesting activities conducted by women include cooking, salting, smoking and drying of seafood, and making shell craft jewellery (Tuara 1998). Tuara (1998) observed various forms of seafood cooking undertaken by women, such as boiling (sometimes in coconut cream), frying, barbecuing over an open fire, or placing fish and other foods in an earth oven by wrapping them first with leaves before burying and covering them with hot stones. In contrast, little documentation on men's roles regarding post-harvesting activities exists.

Both women and men participate in the fishery market economy but in varying degrees, depending on their location and market access. Sites with good access and/or reliable transport to urban centres rely more on fresh fish sales for income than sites with limited access and unreliable transport. For the remote outer islands (e.g. Likiep, Ailuk and Ebon) catch is typically used to feed families and only excess resources tend to be sold. For this reason, there is a higher dependence on processed fish and shell crafts sales (Pinca et al. 2009; Tuara 1998).

Up until the late 1990s, drying and salting fish before selling them at the urban centres was the only option for outer island fishers, due to the absence of refrigeration facilities and unreliable transport services to urban centres (Tuara 1998). Over the years, market access for outer island communities has improved through MIMRA's community-outreach programme, Outer Island Fish Market Centres (OIFMCs), implemented across several communities. Fresh fish is bought from OIFMCs, stored in ice and transported to urban centres to be resold to consumers on Majuro and Ebeye (MIMRA 2020; Pinca et al. 2009). Once the fish arrive at the fish markets, they are sorted, reweighed, and re-iced. Some fish are also frozen, but a majority are chilled and displayed on ice for customers. The OIFMC programme has boosted the income of outer island communities that otherwise would be without a reliable income source, generating USD 124,182 for local fishers across five RMI atolls in 2020 (MIMRA 2020). Given that men are usually the ones engaged in fish harvesting, they are also most likely to directly derive an income from this programme. An assessment of how these benefits trickle down to women and marginalised groups would help identify areas for a stronger engagement of women and women's economic empowerment, especially with regards to women's active roles in post-harvest processing. The assessment could include other groups such as youth or people with disabilities, where feasible. In this way, more diverse groups can benefit from the OIFMC programme or other future development programmes.



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Some localities close to urban centres, such as Laura on Majuro Atoll, have their own systems of fish trading, where men's groups fish together to share the high fuel and transport costs, and then market their catch jointly (Pinca et al. 2009). In the late 2000s, a middleman system, operating in Laura, contracted male fishers under a salary-based agreement to market their catch (Pinca et al. 2009). However, it remains unclear if contracts with these fishers were formal or not, and if incomes were satisfactory. Thus, it may be worthwhile to further understand the operations of these different systems and ascertain if some aspects can be replicated to improve market access for women in the shell craft sector.

In the late 1990s, women on Majuro had to market their produce through retail shops and handicraft outlets in town while also selling fresh and processed fish and clams at local stores and along the roadside (Tuara 1998). Women on Arno sold their processed fish (salted, dried and smoked) through their husbands, locally or on Majuro (Tuara 1998). However, it is unclear who harvested the fish, why their husbands marketed the produce on their behalf, who received the income, and how the money was used.

An important women's activity that is still relevant today, is the making of shell craft jewellery and its commercialisation. This is particularly for outer island communities, as shells can be easily stored and transported compared to seafood (Pinca et al. 2009; Tuara 1998). Shell crafts are made by fashioning pandanus leaves, coconut stalks and shells (Pinca et al. 2009). Findings in the late 1990s noted that the women of Majuro faced constraints when selling their handicrafts due to competition from their outer island counterparts (Tuara 1998), although no explanation was provided. To improve the marketability of these products, Tuara (1998) suggests: 1) exploring novel methods of shell craft, including pearl-oyster shell cleaning and drilling; 2) providing support services through information, funding and training to women involved in fisheries; and 3) researching overseas markets for shell craft. In spite of these recommendations from the 1990s, recent information indicates that artisans continue to face challenges in selling their handicraft due to the lack of industry structure and external support, such as for specialised marketing advice. Improving opportunities for women's meaningful participation is also fundamental to increase their influence over the whole value chain, from sustainable production and extraction of raw materials, to the fabrication of handicrafts, coupled with viable marketing avenues (Huffer and Flood – in review).



## 5.2 OFFSHORE FISHERIES

While men have been primarily involved in the offshore fisheries sector, either as crew members or as observers onboard tuna fishing vessels, there has also been limited involvement of women. This includes some notable involvement in the science and management aspects of the offshore fishery as regulators, observers and compliance advisors, but a larger proportion of women are involved in the onshore-related activities of this industry, such as in tuna processing factories.

There are currently two women at the helm of MIMRA's key areas with direct links to the offshore sector: a Deputy Director who also heads the Oceanic and Industrial Affairs Division, and the head of the newly established Competent Authority Division. The Oceanic and Industrial Affairs Division manages and regulates the commercial tuna fishery, including domestic and foreign fishing fleets that use RMI's EEZ. The Competent Authority Division is responsible for improving the country's sanitary controls of fish exports to satisfy the European Union export market standards.

RMI's first female observer on industrial tuna fleets was employed in 2011, and as of 2019, 4 of the 68 observers were women (MIMRA 2019a). A woman also served as the Electronic Reporting Officer and was tasked with implementing MIMRA's new electronic reporting tools that is used for collecting fisheries data on tuna fishing vessels. Her main task was to train and coordinate observers and fishing vessel captains on the use of these new tools. Another key supportive factor is that the incumbent observer programme coordinator takes a lot of care when selecting the vessels on which women are placed on, with female observers always having a cabin to themselves and only assigned on vessels with trustworthy captains. While women are encouraged to partake as observers, no female observers were stationed in 2020 due to personal or family reasons, which was further compounded by the halting of the observer programme due to COVID-19 travel restrictions (MIMRA 2020).

In the private sector, women dominate in tuna processing factories, working as unskilled labourers on the processing line, with one factory reportedly having 65% of its staff made up of women who are mainly responsible for loining tuna (Tuara and Passfield 2012). Some women are involved in laboratory work, conducting quality control tasks (e.g. water quality, histamine levels, hazard analysis and critical control points), but the majority of these positions are filled by overseas recruits because few locals have the required skills (Tuara and Passfield 2012).

In the informal sector, observations from the early 2000s indicate that women are also involved in other onshore-related entrepreneurial activities, such as selling surplus fish sourced from tuna vessels along the roadside or at fish markets. Some Marshallese men also fish and land tuna on a small scale but there is no available landing data to gauge the volume of their catch (Vunisea 2006). Interestingly, tuna is five times more expensive than reef fish, so only marginally consumed by locals (Troubat and Sharp 2021).

In spite of the economic advantages afforded by the offshore sector, there have also been some social costs, particularly for women (Vunisea 2006) and children. Large transshipment operations have been associated with the sex trade, smuggling, drug use and trafficking (Vunisea 2006) as described in Chapter 4.

It is important to consider whether there has been any progress on women's roles, responsibilities, and welfare in relation to the offshore fishery, including in the private sector. There is a need to gauge whether any upskilling and promotion has occurred for women working in tuna processing plants, either in the processing line, laboratories or other areas, such as management. Additionally, COVID-19-related restrictions have limited the onshore interactions of foreign fishing vessels and their crews when calling into port (MIMRA 2020); therefore, current information is also needed to assess the economic and social impacts of these restrictions.





## 5.3 WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Enhancing women's economic empowerment is vital to the fisheries sector because their contribution to this sector remains undervalued, despite their gross earnings from fisheries in 2017 being higher than those of men (RMI Government 2018). Based on the assumption that women's contribution in the coastal and aquaculture sector is largely informal, enhancing their economic empowerment in this sector is vital to achieving equitable sustainable development in the country. This will also boost financial opportunities for women and their families in outer island communities. Therefore, understanding the value chains across the coastal fisheries and aquaculture sectors and the associated gender division of labour, will help fisheries stakeholders make targeted development interventions that are tailored to the needs of these communities, including women. Enhancing value-adding on marine products is another potential income-generation opportunity for Marshallese women because they dominate the post-harvest fisheries sector (Tuara 1998), a suggestion made in the late 1990s, and one that remains relevant today.

To encourage women's participation in RMI fisheries livelihoods programmes, a stronger collaboration – comprising a consortium of stakeholders from fisheries, gender and economic development sectors with links to the private sector – is needed. Conversely, a recent value-chain analysis on the handicraft sector suggests the need for stronger collaboration between the handicraft sector and MIMRA because seashells are key materials used by female artisans in their work (Huffer and Flood – in review). Recent information suggests that Marshallese women continue to face challenges in selling their shell crafts due to the lack of industry structure, with women having little control or influence over how the industry operates, in large part due to a lack of representation and visibility (Huffer and Flood – in review). Therefore, it is worth exploring how MIMRA's community outreach programmes can be effectively used to also support and enhance livelihood opportunities for women shell craft artisans.







## ANALYSIS OF THE ENABLING FACTORS TO MAINSTREAM GENDER IN RMI'S FISHERIES SECTOR







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The focus of this chapter is to analyse the enabling factors for gender mainstreaming in RMI's fisheries sector, including relevant sectoral commitments, policies, frameworks and the disposition of key stakeholders, particularly MIMRA. Career pathways to enhance women's participation in this sector are also identified. Unless otherwise stated, sources of information are from key informant interviews and feedback provided by MIMRA including at the SPC 2022 Micronesia Sub-regional Workshop on Gender Equality and Human Rights Issues in Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture. Interpretations and recommendations from authors are clearly stated as such.



## 6.1 KEY BIODIVERSITY AND FISHERIES POLICIES, STRATEGIES AND FRAMEWORKS THAT SUPPORT GENDER MAINSTREAMING

The key instrument that supports gender mainstreaming within RMI's coastal fisheries sector is the Reimaanlok National Conservation Area Plan (Reimaanlok Plan). This plan focuses on the principles, process and guidelines for the design, establishment and management of conservation areas to be fully owned, led and endorsed by local communities based on their needs, values and cultural heritage (Reimaan National Planning Team 2008). While biodiversity conservation is a key driver of the Reimaanlok Plan, it also provides guidance on collecting information regarding access to and use of marine resources, including division of labour along gender lines (Reimaan National Planning Team 2008). While socioeconomic assessments account for certain gendered activities for communities participating in the Reimaanlok process, more updated information is needed regarding men's and women's access to and use of marine resources, including their perceived impacts and benefits from fisheries management.

The plan calls for the participation and representation of diverse groups, which is further enhanced through the accompanying Reimaanlok Framework. This framework comprises an 8-step process that employs community-based tools and approaches to meet local conservation objectives. Thus, the Reimaanlok mechanism, comprising both the plan and the framework recognises the importance of equity and inclusivity. A vital element of this mechanism includes having men and women participating in community consultations and as members of their respective LRCs. While the number of women in these community consultations remains low, women's stakeholder groups have been formed across the various communities participating in the Reimaanlok programme, with the most vocal women normally selected to represent their group in consultations and meetings.

Other relevant sectorial instruments supporting gender mainstreaming at the international, regional and national level through their close alignment to the Reimaanlok mechanism is denoted in Table 2..

**TABLE 2.** Fisheries sectorial instruments that support gender mainstreaming.

Sectorial Instruments (conventions, policies, strategies, frameworks, plans)	Relevance to women's empowerment or gender equality	How gender is mainstreamed in RMI with respect to these sectorial instruments
<b>Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)</b>	The CBD recognises the vital role women play in sustainable biodiversity management and affirming their need to fully participate at all levels of policy making and implementation concerning biodiversity conservation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Reimaanlok Plan assists RMI to fulfil their CBD commitment.</li> <li>• Women are part of decision-making at community level through the Reimaanlok process.</li> <li>• Women are also involved at policy-level decision-making through the CMAC<sup>10</sup> meetings but there is little engagement from the national women's machinery.</li> </ul>
<b>New Song for Coastal Fisheries: The Noumea Strategy (2015)</b>	A key regional coastal fisheries policy, the New Song for Coastal Fisheries: The Noumea Strategy (2015), emphasises the under-recognised contributions of women and youth and calls for their greater participation in decision-making about coastal resources and more equitable benefits from them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women and youth participation in decision-making of RMI's coastal resources is closely reflected through the Reimaanlok mechanism.</li> <li>• Equitable benefits through access to coastal resources is currently unclear given the customary laws regarding traditional fishing areas and cultural prohibitions concerning women's fishing activities.</li> </ul>

<sup>10</sup> CMAC- Coastal Management Advisory Council. Comprises representatives from a range of organisations and backgrounds with a common interest to conserve and, sustainably develop and manage RMI's coastal and marine resources.  
<https://www.atollconservation.org/cmac>



**TABLE 2.** Fisheries sectorial instruments that support gender mainstreaming. (cont.)

<b>Pacific Framework for Action on Scaling up CBFM: 2021–2025 (CBFM Framework for Action)</b>	<p>The regional CBFM Framework for Action provides guidance in the implementation on the scaling-up of coastal fisheries management by incorporating community-based fisheries management (CBFM) approaches. CBFM is taken to mean fisheries management approaches that are community-driven and encompass an ecosystem approach that will sustain livelihoods and ensure resilient island communities with Objective 5.2 focusing on inclusivity and equitability in decision-making and benefits.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are close synergies between the CBFM Framework for Action and the Reimaanlok mechanism.</li> <li>• Men, women including youth and elders partake in the decision-making, design, and management of their respective community-based fisheries areas.</li> </ul>
<b>MIMRA Strategic Plan (MSP) 2019–2023</b>	<p>The MSP's mission is to facilitate the sustainable and responsible use of marine resources in RMI and stresses the importance of the fisheries sector to food security, livelihoods, and culture of the Marshallese people, and to their national economy.</p> <p>Recognises the partnership between MIMRA and the local communities through the Reimaanlok Framework and states how this process supports the empowerment of local communities to identify needs, problems and solutions for sustainable resource management through community-based consultations (MIMRA 2019b).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The MSP uses the Reimaanlok Framework as a tool for a more inclusive approach when working with local communities and to also empower them.</li> <li>• While the MSP does not go into detail about gender equity or fairness, the community-based consultations under the Reimaanlok process is built on the perception of fairness where both men and women including elders and youth partake in community consultations.</li> </ul>

While there is no stand-alone gender policy for RMI's fisheries sector, the gender-related sectorial instruments mentioned in this chapter complement those discussed in Chapter 4. It is observed that for fisheries stakeholders, there is a high uptake on gender commitments and policies associated with fisheries and biodiversity outcomes such as the MSP and the Reimaanlok Plan and Framework as these are the ones that they are most familiar with, and which are most closely aligned to their sector deliverables.

## 6.1.1 ENABLING FACTORS TO MAINSTREAM GENDER ACROSS RMI'S COASTAL FISHERIES AND AQUACULTURE SECTOR

### Reimaanlok

MIMRA plays an integral role in coordinating the Reimaanlok process across the country, and collaborates with key organisations such as the Marshall Islands Conservation Society (MICS). Community consultation processes under the Reimaanlok mechanism are based on the concept of equity and inclusivity, which includes having dialogues with men and women, as well as youth and traditional land-owning groups, with representatives of these groups being members of LRCs. LRCs, together with traditional leaders, provide advice on core decisions regarding fisheries management within their respective communities, which in-turn influences community resource management plans. Examining the make-up of these LRCs and associated leadership will offer further insight on the operations of these community decision-making bodies, and can help determine if gender, age and socioeconomic status impacts an individual's level of influence within these bodies.

While women are encouraged to participate in community decision-making processes, including the Reimaanlok process, only a handful of women participate in fisheries-related consultations, with the most vocal women joining LRCs. MIMRA is devising ways to encourage women's participation in fisheries consultations including:

- Using inclusive terminology. The word "fishing" in traditional Marshallese language has gender connotations and is usually associated with men's fishing activities. Therefore, MIMRA is mindful of using inclusive language regarding marine resource harvesting in their community consultations, so that it is understood that the consultations are for all community members, not just for men.
- Setting up of community women's stakeholder groups. This is done at the beginning of the Reimaanlok consultation process, and is often well received. These groups provide a platform for women's participation at important community fisheries discussions.
- Engaging women's machineries:
  - Ministry of Culture and Internal Affairs (MCIA) comprises several key divisions that MIMRA works with, including women, culture and local government, with the latter responsible for the mayors' offices and island councils. The mayors' offices and island councils provide a key role in facilitating and approving visitations to outer island communities, including for fisheries stakeholders and development partners. Additionally, MCIA and MIMRA are members of the Coastal Management Advisory Council (CMAC), which provides a mechanism for collaboration, integration and technical advice on natural resources management in RMI, including for the Reimaanlok process. While the culture division occasionally interacts with MIMRA through CMAC meetings, MIMRA recognises the need to foster stronger collaborations between the women and local government divisions of MCIA as they are the divisions responsible for women and local communities.
  - Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI) is a non-governmental organisation whose objective is to advance women's participation in fisheries-related consultations. WUTMI is also a member of the CMAC. MIMRA has previously engaged WUTMI to amplify MIMRA's messages through their various women's chapters across the country. However, collaboration with WUTMI is inconsistent and needs to be strengthened. A partnership with WUTMI will also strengthen the upcoming review of the Reimaanlok National Conservation Area Plan with regards to improving inclusive and meaningful engagement and with women, youth and people with disabilities.





- Timing consultations so women who are busy during the day can attend meetings in the evenings. While evening consultations are more conducive for most women, those with young or elderly dependents are usually absent from these meetings and are only seen during church services.

To help inform the Reimaanlok process, MIMRA collects baseline information through ecological and socioeconomic surveys. These surveys contain certain sex-disaggregated information that is related to a household or community, but with limited gender-related information on marine resource usage and associated management. Currently, the survey includes over-arching questions on marine species important to a community, which is usually associated with charismatic species caught by men, including their proposed management. Information on women's handicraft activities is also collected, including on species used for shell craft, but this information is not often used to inform community fisheries management interventions. Therefore, incorporating information and management of species that are important to women can increase their interest in participating in Reimaanlok consultations and thus garner their buy-in.

Support for Reimaanlok participating communities is further enhanced through the Protected Areas Network (PAN) office which is housed under MIMRA. The PAN office was established to provide funding to communities for activities outlined in their respective resource management plans, via an application process. While the PAN office does not currently employ gender-responsive budgeting when allocating resources to communities, it would be appropriate to determine whether the activities outlined in the various resource management plans will benefit the men and women of these communities.

To boost community engagement, MIMRA has been logging information on the communities it has worked with, and is exploring effective tools that communities can use to collect and send relevant information to MIMRA. A consulting firm has also been engaged to develop a Reimaanlok monitoring toolkit mainly focusing on marine resources. Incorporating social dimensions into this toolkit will improve monitoring of any progress made through the Reimaanlok mechanism using a gender lens.

## Other coastal fisheries development and aquaculture initiatives

There is a dearth of sex-disaggregated information regarding MIMRA's fisheries economic development work across the country's coastal communities. Although it is understood that the FAD and OIFMC programmes normally engage fishermen, as they are the ones who usually use FADs and are the main fish suppliers in the OIFMC programme. While MIMRA's community engagement, including consultations for these programmes, is open to all community members, it is usually the men who attend these meetings. Encouraging more women to attend these consultations is an initial step to include them in fisheries' economic development initiatives as they are already involved as fish traders, from fish caught from FADs, or as middlepersons, such as those women who are based on Ebeye and Majuro. Additionally, given the success of the OIFMC programme in supporting economic livelihoods for outer island communities, it is worth exploring how this can also be expanded to support women in the shell craft sector.

The aquaculture programme is another notable MIMRA initiative for outer island communities and involves women, men and youth (MIMRA 2019a). Having women join these (aquaculture) farmer associations is a positive trend, although there is no information on gendered roles in aquaculture farms. Therefore, a gender analysis of the aquaculture sector may be needed to better understand gender issues, including men and women working together through family- or community-run farms. For the Likiep community, there have been accounts of women joining their farmer association. Farmer associations can provide an entry point for MIMRA to understand and enhance women's roles in aquaculture. Collecting sex- and age-disaggregate data on participants of these aquaculture programmes, including their different roles, and making this information available will improve the understanding of any existing gendered division of labour and identify ways to enhance women's engagement. Future plans can explore different aquaculture ventures, such as cowrie and sea cucumber mariculture, as another opportunity to explore women's engagement, depending on social, environmental and financial viability, funding and technical capacity.

Given the limited updated information on women's post-harvesting activities, exploring women's activities across the fisheries and aquaculture value chains can identify other existing and potential economic empowerment opportunities.



## 6.2 STAKEHOLDERS IN THE FISHERIES SECTOR

The following subsections examine the institutional capacity of state and non-state institutions, particularly MIMRA, for supporting gender equity across the fisheries sector, within their organisation and across their policy areas and programming.

### 6.2.1 MARSHALL ISLANDS MARINE RESOURCES AUTHORITY

As of April 2021, MIMRA employed 94 national staff of which, 78 are men and 16 are women, and 2 subnational staff who are both men (MIMRA unpublished data – April 2021). There are seven senior positions at MIMRA that employ three women and four men (MIMRA unpublished data – April 2021), which includes the director and two deputy directors, comprising one man and two women, respectively. More women undertake clerical work than men but progress has been made in technical areas, with women engaged as observers on industrial tuna fleets and as scientific divers and expedition leaders in the area of coastal fisheries. The Competent Authority division is fully staffed by women. MIMRA also has community outreach programmes, including outer island fish bases that are all managed by men, while the MIMRA-managed Ebeye and Majuro fish markets are staffed by both men and women.



**Political will to mainstream gender:** MIMRA rated its political will to mainstream gender as high, while recognising that there is room for improvement. It currently aligns its operations with the National Gender Mainstreaming Policy. The newly revised MIMRA Employee Handbook, which is the equivalent to a human resources policy, states that MIMRA is an equal opportunity employer. Further, MIMRA has a sexual harassment policy in place. While there is some awareness by MIMRA personnel regarding CEDAW and the National Gender Mainstreaming Policy, knowledge of the 2019 Gender Equality Act is limited. The Reimaanlok mechanism supports the operationalisation of MIMRA's political will to support gender mainstreaming in its external coastal fisheries programmes. However, the Reimaanlok mechanism is limited to activities of community-based resource management. Other than that, there is little reflection of political will in overarching and/or strategic guidelines and policy directives.

**Organisational culture that supports gender mainstreaming:** As mentioned above, there is some willingness to mainstream gender within MIMRA, and supported by a strong political will from the organisation's executive. MIMRA's organisational structure, however, does not include clear roles and responsibilities under current job descriptions, nor is there a clearly identified focal point for gender matters. Reporting mechanisms do not include specific gender reporting sections and sex-disaggregated data is only collected for certain activities (e.g. Reimaanlok process) but would benefit from a more systematic data collection approach. A stronger collaboration with the women's division under the Ministry of Culture and Internal Affairs (MCIA) and with other women's organisations, including WUTMI, could also improve organisational culture. These partnerships will enable MIMRA to participate in national gender events, debates and meetings that can provide a platform for dialogue and engagement, which can translate into more sector-specific discussions on the relevance of gender in fisheries.

To strengthen MIMRA in its gender mainstreaming work, there have been suggestions for MCIA to be more inclusive and actively involve MIMRA, given that the engagement of their women's division with MIMRA has waned over time compared to 20 years ago when they were active in CMAC meetings. Stronger collaboration between MIMRA and MCIA's women's division will help to fulfil requirements in the Gender Equality Act under the Special Measures provisions, which states that "the Ministry must provide capacity building to all government employees across all levels of government: i) gender equality; ii) gender mainstreaming; and iii) special measures for achieving substantive gender equality". This is a strong basis for an improved engagement between MIMRA and MCIA, which can foster organisational change through capacity building, engagement and mutual learning on how gender matters in the fisheries sector.

At the operational level, there are no specific gender programmes or official gender officers, but two gender champions exist who support gender equality within MIMRA as part of their senior leadership. Both women and men have similar opportunities to voice their opinions in internal meetings and to also upskill themselves for career progression, with provisions for MIMRA personnel to take study leave in furthering their qualifications. More women now occupy senior management positions, including in technical areas that were previously dominated by men. However, certain physical activities that can inhibit women's participation – due to the strenuous nature of the work such as moving heavy equipment – is mostly undertaken by men, with most women preferring not to do this. For women who wish to be involved in more physically demanding roles, they must demonstrate their willingness and attributes required for these positions. Women are now also involved in traditionally male dominated activities, including as observers on industrial tuna fleets, as certified SCUBA divers, and participating in and/or leading underwater ecological assessments.

**Accountability and responsibility mechanisms to support gender mainstreaming:** There is no dedicated accountability mechanism supporting gender mainstreaming internally or externally. MIMRA collects sex-disaggregated data on interns and for applicants intending to work there, and internally stores and monitors this when preparing interviews for new hires. More on an ad hoc basis, MIMRA also collects sex-disaggregated data on participants in meetings or consultations. As mentioned above, a routine-based and more structural approach to data collection by sex (quantitative) that is embedded in ministerial and national reporting mechanisms, including the collection of other gender relevant information (qualitative) when conducting socioeconomic surveys or assessments on the efficacy of development support with regards to equitable benefits, will strengthen accountability and enable mainstreaming of gender equality.

**Technical capacity to mainstream gender:** There is basic awareness of gender concepts but there is limited technical capacity to apply concepts (e.g. through conducting simple gender analysis as a baseline to inform programming). No gender sensitisation training has been undertaken for most MIMRA staff and MCIA as the leading national agency that provides mainstreaming support does not necessarily think of MIMRA as a stakeholder. Therefore, MIMRA has not been accessing training opportunities from national gender capacity building programmes. MIMRA's unique semi-autonomous set-up was mentioned as a contributing factor to why they are often not considered as a stakeholder for gender mainstreaming-related national activities. Despite the vital contributions of women and men fishers to the nation's economy, MIMRA has not been engaged in women's economic empowerment initiatives. This could be explained by MIMRA's different structure compared to other ministries, and also because the gendered dimensions of the fisheries space are not well understood by both fisheries and gender experts.

Some MIMRA personnel have undertaken a gender awareness exercise in a previous regional Heads of Fisheries meeting, resulting in their interest to explore support in integrating gender into their work. There is no dedicated gender focal point<sup>11</sup> within MIMRA, with occasional gender focal points being appointed on an ad hoc basis depending on the nature of the project. MIMRA is aware that investing in staff's technical skills for gender mainstreaming, such as undertaking a simple gender analysis, will be beneficial to achieving their objectives successfully, especially for their community outreach programme, which requires a strong understanding of gender dimensions and gender sensitive facilitation skills. In addition, an increased technical capacity of MIMRA staff on gender mainstreaming will enable gender budgeting considerations and other planning related activities to be considerate of gender dimensions. Currently, there are no specific financial resources allocated to enhance gender equality and the empowerment of women internally or externally. MIMRA's positive willingness is not institutionalised, which means that commitments at the political level and support from gender champions at the senior management level have not yet resulted in structural changes that can enable mainstreaming. The only formalised structure to support the participation of women and other marginalised groups is through the Reimaanlok mechanism, which serves as a strong example as how built-in empowerment elements can foster positive change through the establishment of community led decision-making that includes diverse voices.

## 6.2.2 NON-STATE ACTORS AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Several non-state actors and educational institutions are also involved in RMI's fisheries sector through their direct engagement, or as members of the CMAC. Identifying these key stakeholders and highlighting their areas of work can help improve gender mainstreaming in this sector.

### Marshall Islands Conservation Society

MICS is a small locally led non-governmental organisation (NGO) whose involvement in the fisheries sector is mainly through its work under the Reimaanlok process and as a CMAC member. It also partners with MIMRA and other government (including intergovernmental) and non-governmental institutions on certain projects. MICS currently has a female Executive Director and, due to its small team, does not have any specialised gender programmes or budgets. However, MICS works closely with other organisations such as Women United Together Marshall Islands (WUTMI), the advocacy group Jo-Jikum, the International Organisation for Migration, MCIA, The Nature Conservancy and SPC to support gender integration into their work programmes.

<sup>11</sup> A gender focal point is the key staff member within an organisation dealing with its gender mainstreaming strategy and building capacities among his or her colleagues for incorporating gender into their work, in terms of content and processes.



including community outreach work. One notable initiative being undertaken by MICS in collaboration with Jo-Jikum involves furnishing Marshallese mothers on two islands, with reusable diapers to reduce environmental pollution, including along the coastal areas. This initiative is part of the Pacific People Advancing Change (PPAC) programme, which is administered by SPC's Human Rights and Social Development Division (HRSD).

### **Women United Together Marshall Islands**

WUTMI is a local women-led NGO whose goal is to advance the causes and improve the lives of Marshallese women and their families (WUTMI 2022). Given WUTMI's wide reach across the country through its different community groups, called chapters, WUTMI is seen by key fisheries stakeholders – including MIMRA and MICS – as a strategic organisation to partner with in helping mainstream gender in fisheries community outreach programmes. While WUTMI plays a key role in advocating and representing the interest of Marshallese women, including at CMAC meetings, it was not possible to interview staff for this study.

### **Jo-Jikum**

Jo-Jikum is an advocacy group that focuses on awareness raising about crucial issues facing Marshallese Islanders, such as climate change and environment pollution, and is a CMAC member. While Jo-Jikum does not have any specific gender or fisheries programmes, it undertakes awareness activities that link the environment to human rights through SPC's PPAC programme. Given this link with SPC's HRSD Division through PPAC, opportunities can be further explored on how gender and environment (including fisheries) can be included in its advocacy work.

### **Marshall Islands Billfish Club**

The Marshall Islands Billfish Club runs annual fishing competitions. Given that women are now engaged in trolling and bottom fishing competitions, it will be worth exploring how the Billfish Club can use its platform to encourage more fishing competitions for women, including women in outer island communities, and thereby enhance their interest in the fisheries sector.

### **College of the Marshall Islands**

College of the Marshall Islands (CMI) is a member of CMAC and provides opportunities for students to partake in, and gain invaluable work experience through, MIMRA's Internship Programme. CMI offers a variety of courses, including fisheries-related ones, and has been striving to achieve gender parity in RMI's higher education sector by collecting sex-disaggregated data on students and staff while also having gender equality policies. For the 2021 fall academic year, CMI recorded similar completion rates for female and male students at 65.2% and 65.9%, respectively (CMI, unpublished data – 2022). While this institution has a good sex-disaggregated breakdown of students enrolled in the college and across their 10 most popular subjects, data from their 2021 academic year indicated that fisheries studies was not one of them (CMI, unpublished data 2022). Understanding why fisheries studies is not a popular subject can be further explored given the various opportunities that the fisheries sector provides in the country. Furthermore, CMI also offers programmes at their Maritime Vocational Training Center, but to date, enrolment and graduates are predominantly male. However, these maritime programmes could be another opening for women who aspire to join the fisheries sector as seafarers, as the training centre is locally based and so easily accessible.

## University of the South Pacific

The University of the South Pacific (USP) is one of the tertiary institutions with a presence at RMI and also a CMAC member. For USP, fisheries or gender-related courses are provided at their main campus in Fiji, although some can be accessed online through their Distance Flexible Learning programme. To understand and support gender equality within this institution, USP collects sex-disaggregated data on students and staff while also having gender equality policies. Furthermore, staff and students based at the RMI campus have undertaken training on GSI awareness (USP unpublished data 2022).

## Other potential stakeholders where limited information is available

While a list of key stakeholders is described above, it is understood that there are other important organisations, either formal or informal, that play a crucial role in RMI's fisheries sector. Identifying opportunities and harnessing the strengths of these organisations can provide entry points to support gender mainstreaming in this sector particularly at community level. Below is a list of stakeholders that could be consulted when undertaking future in-country gender and fisheries field assessments to learn more about their operations due to limited publicly available information:

- Likiep Farmers Association
- Local Resources Committees
- WUTMI's local women's chapters
- Fisher associations



## 6.2 CAREER PATHWAYS

**MIMRA Internship Programme:** Given the limited economic base and career opportunities in RMI, the fisheries sector is an area that can be further explored for aspiring Marshallese professionals. The MIMRA Internship Programme has proven to be a career pathway for both men and women as it provides tertiary students with the opportunity to gain practical experience in the areas of fisheries research, conservation, science and management (MIMRA 2021). The Internship Programme brochure highlights success stories of notable male and female alumni, including MIMRA's senior leadership comprising the director and both deputy directors







(MIMRA 2021). It also features the various divisional chiefs or senior personnel, including Chief of Coastal Fisheries, Chief Scientist (Coastal Fisheries), Oceanic Fisheries Chief, and the PAN Office Coordinator and Lab Manager, with mentions of other noteworthy staff who partook in this programme and consequently gained employment with MIMRA (MIMRA 2021). The brochure also indicates that most (if not all) of MIMRA's senior personnel, both women and men, have obtained either a Bachelor's or a Master's Degree from an overseas or local institution.

While it can be assumed that there is little obstacle inhibiting women's career progression within MIMRA, verifying this assumption against their human resources policies can provide further insight on how MIMRA's policies and operations are aligned to RMI's gender equality obligations. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that given MIMRA's semi-autonomous set-up with a mandate to watch over the country's fishery, they are often not considered by women's development agencies, including MCIA, for most gender equality discussions, programmes, or training, despite their vital role in the country's economic development. There is a disconnect that can be improved by fostering stronger relationships with gender and development agencies and non-state actors to fully comprehend the gendered dimensions of the fisheries sector. This will also enhance understanding of gender roles, gaps and opportunities, to progress gender mainstreaming across the fisheries value chain.

**Links to educational and research institutions:** Improved education of women and girls supports gender equality, which can lead to a wide range of benefits while also enhancing employment opportunities. Access to higher education for Marshallese citizens is enabled through educational grants such as the Pell Grant, national and other available scholarships. This enables men and women including young mothers to attain higher education despite their economic circumstances. Given these opportunities for Marshall Islanders to gain a higher education, creating stronger synergies between the fisheries sector and education institutes can boost the interest of students to view fisheries as an important career pathway, particularly for women, who may have reservations about the fisheries sector. This can be further enhanced by highlighting how Marshallese women have progressed in this sector such as at state institutions such as MIMRA, and NGOs such as MICS. Furthermore, women can also be encouraged to join the fisheries industries as qualified professionals given the lack of locally qualified technicians to carry out quality assurance tests (e.g. hazard analysis and critical control points) at tuna processing factories.





## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

# 07





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While there is a willingness to mainstream gender across RMI's fisheries sector, there is limited technical capacity within MIMRA and fisheries stakeholders to operationalise gender mainstreaming within their sector. A set of recommendations to support MIMRA and associated stakeholders to mainstream gender in fisheries is outlined below.

### Investing in partnerships and collaborations

**Recommendation 1:** MIMRA to build stronger collaborations with the women's machinery and line ministries, including MCIA and WUTMI to support mainstreaming efforts in the fisheries sector. A partnership with WUTMI will strengthen the upcoming review of the Reimaanlok National Conservation Area Plan with regards to improving inclusive and meaningful engagement and monitoring of this engagement with women, youth, and people with disabilities vis-à-vis local government and as part of established LRC structures. In doing so, the existing barriers for women, youth, and persons with disability to actively participate in local decision-making need to be sensitively addressed.

**Recommendation 2:** Stronger relationships with educational institutions will enhance the promotion of fisheries as a career pathway for women, men, girls and boys. Current biases and strong cultural norms that women and girls do not fish or should not fish need to be addressed through an improved image of fisheries as a worthwhile career for all. Showcasing progress of women from MIMRA and MICS in leading roles in science and management or similar empowering educational awareness campaigns are powerful tools to break gender stereotypes influencing career choices.

### Gender mainstreaming capacity strengthened

**Recommendation 3:** Invest in GSI training for MIMRA coastal fisheries and aquaculture teams to increase understanding of GSI and provide basic skills for GSI mainstreaming. This should include gender analysis and how to improve gender budgeting and planning. GSI trainings can be a starting point to discuss improved GSI reporting within MIMRA's reporting structure and best ways to increase sex-disaggregated data collection, including from socioeconomic studies. MIMRA should also appoint a dedicated gender focal point with clear roles and tasks outlined, and support their in-depth GSI capacity building.

### Women's Economic Empowerment

**Recommendation 4:** MIMRA could identify potential complementary or alternative livelihood ventures to promote outer island women's economic engagement, including aquaculture options. Existing local associations (e.g. Likiep farmers association) can provide an entry point for identifying women's participation. MIMRA's future plans can explore different aquaculture ventures, like cowrie and sea cucumber mariculture, as another opportunity to explore women's engagement, depending on social, environmental and financial viability, funding and technical capacity.

**Recommendation 5:** Stronger engagement and improved linkages between MIMRA and different sections within the Ministry of Natural Resources and Commerce on women's economic empowerment in the handicraft sector (shell craft). This includes the need for increased information on shell collection and use by women as a livelihood source and an increased understanding of the shell craft sector from a fisheries perspective, including resource management needs, value-adding opportunities, and improved access to markets, for example using or replicating the well-established OIFMC programme.

**Recommendation 6:** Assess the existing OIFMC programme and how it can be improved to adopt a GSI lens so that benefits will be more equitable. In doing so, identify training needs for women, especially on post-harvest handling, processing and value adding of marine resources.

### Community Resource Management

**Recommendation 7:** Improve the understanding of site-based implementation of the Reimaanlok framework from a GSI lens, including costs and benefits, governance structures, operational processes, and conflict resolution systems. Such assessments require an analysis of site-specific community resource management plans, and traditional ownership and access rights regimes. Collected data need to be disaggregated according to gender, age and other relevant factors that might influence equity.

**Recommendation 8:** Apply inclusive participatory approaches by incorporating information on species management that are important to women during Reimaanlok consultations, to garner their support and buy-in. While also ensuring meaningful engagement with both young women and men, particularly in the outer islands, so they understand that they are valued environmental stewards of their community and therefore stymie their desire for out-migration. This could be further operationalised by including gender- and age-sensitive indicators into the Reimaanlok monitoring toolkit that is being developed through a consulting firm in partnership with MIMRA.



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Florence Edwards	Deputy Director – Coastal & Community Affairs Division	Marshall Islands Marine Resources Authority	F
Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner	Director	Jo-Jikum	F
Dr. Irene Taafaki	President	College of the Marshall Islands	F
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Larry Hernandez III	President	Marshall Islands Billfish Club	M









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