How is gender included in small-scale fisheries management and development?

Exploring approaches, barriers and opportunities in Melanesia

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Fisheries, like other economic sectors, is not immune to gender inequality, and women tend to experience the brunt of inequality as undervalued and under-represented fisheries actors within small-scale fisheries (SSF) management and development. Different approaches to address gender inequality, particularly women's marginalisation in the fisheries sector, are gaining momentum. We undertook a study to gain a more comprehensive understanding of these efforts, including the gender approaches employed and the barriers and opportunities for fisheries organisations in Melanesia. This article is a short summary of our open access scientific paper published in the journal Marine Policy.[3]

Introduction

Small-scale fisheries (SSFs) are critical to the provision of food and nutrition security and the livelihoods of coastal communities worldwide (World Bank 2012). Like other sectors, the SSF fisheries sector is not gender neutral or immune to gender inequality (Harper et al. 2020). Women make up an estimated 47% of workers (56 million women) in the SSF sector, operating along fisheries value chains worldwide (World Bank 2012), and contribute to around half of the annual coastal fisheries catch in the Pacific (Harper et al. 2013). Despite women's substantial involvement along fisheries value chains, their contributions are often overlooked, undervalued and under-reported (Harper and Kleiber 2019).

Efforts to address gender inequality, however, particularly women's marginalisation in the fisheries sector, are gaining momentum. This attention is evidenced by increased gender research undertaken in the sector (e.g. Mangubhai et al. 2017; SPC 2018a, b, c), and the growing number of articles in the Pacific Community's (SPC) *Women in Fisheries Information Bulletin*. Financial investments toward gender outcomes are also increasing, including the launch of the EUR 45 million Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership programme, which has established a unit to integrate gender and broader human rights-based approaches to support the sustainable management and development of fisheries. In terms of guidance, the "Pacific Handbook for Gender Equity and Social Inclusion in Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture" was launched by SPC to assist managers and practitioners include gender and broader human rights-based approaches into their sectors and is being used to train and sensitise regional organisations (Barclay et al. 2019).

Despite these various research efforts, investments and guidance, little is understood about the gender approaches being applied, including barriers faced by fisheries organisations that are tasked with promoting equality. Our study sought to understand how *gender inclusion* was being applied in SSF by fisheries organisations. This level of analysis is crucial to ascertain a benchmark for gender in practice, but also to identify opportunities for achieving improved social and fisheries outcomes.

Methods

Our study was conducted in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, between August 2018 and February 2019. We conducted 68 interviews with key informants working in SSFs to document gender inclusion approaches applied within projects, programmes and organisations. Our investigation also sought to understand both perceived and actual capacity for gender inclusion, and the main barriers to gender inclusive practices. Key informants were representatives of government ministries or authorities, local and international non-governmental organisations, and regional organisations and global agencies working on SSFs regionally, in at least one of the three study countries (Table 1). To obtain gender balance in the sampling design, we selected a female and a male informant to interview from each organisation where possible (in total 39 women, 29 men interviewed). We conducted 40 interviews with both authors present, recorded independently in writing, and jointly scribed into Microsoft Excel. The remaining 28 interviews were conducted with one author present.

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Table 1. Gender capacity and access to expertise (experts, organisations) and training over the last 12 months for fisheries organisations and practitioners.

Reach approaches are defined as those that explicitly focus on women's participation in activities or projects (e.g. attendance at meetings, workshops or training)**.**

Benefit approaches provide specific benefits to women (e.g. access to resources) to increase their wellbeing, such as improved food security or income generation.

Empower approaches aim to increase or strengthen the ability of women to make their own strategic life choices (e.g. related to the use of income), and to exercise those choices.

Transform approaches aim to challenge underlying gender norms (both visible and invisible), structures and power dynamics that create and reinforce inequalities.

Type	Respondents		Gender training	Gender capacity ranking		
	#Women	#Men		Very Poor, Poor	Good/Poor	Very Good, Good
Fiji						
Experts	4	3	14%	0%	100%	0%
Government	4	2	0%	17%	33%	50%
Local NGO	4	1	40%	0%	20%	80%
International NGO	5	3	38%	17%	17%	67%
Solomon Islands						
Experts	2	0	0%	50%	50%	0%
Government	3	1	75%	0%	25%	75%
International NGO	3	4	50%	0%	16%	84%
Vanuatu						
Experts	2	1	0%	0%	50%	50%
Government	2	3	20%	20%	0%	80%
Local NGO	2	1	33%	0%	33%	67%
International NGO	1	1	50%	0%	50%	50%
Regional organisations	3	8	27%	0%	36%	64%
Global agencies	4	1	80%	20%	20%	60%

This approach reduced biases in interpretation, and allowed for cross-checking and validation of responses by two independent researchers where possible.

During the interviews we asked respondents to describe the specific approaches used by their organisation to include gender within SSFs management and development projects and programmes. To assess the extent these approaches were aligned with gender best practice, we applied a framework designed for community-based agricultural projects in order to determine whether gender inclusion approaches were likely to "reach", "benefit", or "empower" women's lives (Fig. 1, Theis and Meinzen-Dick 2016; Johnson et al. 2018). We selected this framework because it reflects current thinking on gender inclusion and its successful application in the agricultural sector. It is important to note that these approaches are not linear or sequential; instead, they should be viewed as approaches that, in combination, play an important role in the inclusion and integration of gender into practice.
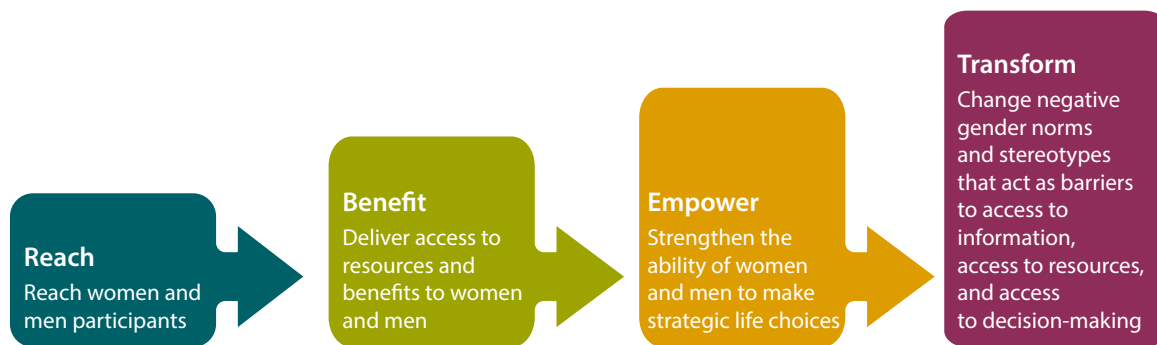
Figure 1. Strategies used in communities. Source: Kleiber et al. (2019), adapted from Johnson et al. (2017) and Theis and Meinzen-Dick (2016)

Reach
Reach women and men participants

Benefit
Deliver access to resources and benefits to women and men

Empower
Strengthen the ability of women and men to make strategic life choices

Transform
Change negative gender norms and stereotypes that act as barriers to access to information, access to resources, and access to decision-making

Results

Gender inclusion approaches

Overall, respondents described 21 different approaches that were used to implement SSFs projects and programmes in coastal communities in the three countries (Table 2). Based on the descriptions, we classified each according to four types of gender approaches (**R**each, **B**enefit, **E**mpower or **T**ransform), and then aggregated these approaches into 11 broader categories: 1) community consultation practice (R1-R6); 2) female leadership (R7-R8); 3) training (R9); 4) presence on committees (R10-R11); 5) gender assessments (R12); 6) learning networks (R13); 7) tradition and culture (R14); 8) women's projects (R15-R16, B1-B2); 9) funding (B3); 10) shared decision-making (E1); and 11) gender norm transformation (T1).

Fishing in Bua Province, Fiji. ©Shiri Ram

Table 2. Approaches used to include gender into small-scale fisheries management, categorized according to four types of outcomes: Reach (R), Benefit (B), Empower (E), Transform (T). Some approaches have been categorized under two gender outcomes based on the description provided by respondents. n=number of respondents who listed an approach.

Broad categories of approaches	n	Code	Specific approaches
Community consultation practice	8	R1	Using participatory community resource management processes (e.g. resource mapping) that try to be as inclusive as possible during planning phases.
	10	R2	Using a community-based adaptive management approach that specifically integrates the viewpoints, perspectives and recommendations of all members of the community, including women, into the final plan.
	28	R3	Efforts to increase the number of women at community meetings or workshops. This includes working through traditional male hierarchies to get the support of leaders to allow more women to participate, or paying special attention to times when women are available.
	20	R4	Making an effort to get their inputs or perspectives of women in community workshops.
	16	R5	Holding separate focal group discussions with women to enable them to speak more freely.
	10	R6	Using female facilitators for workshop settings and for separate focal group discussions.
Female leadership	6	R7	Engaging with women leaders and champions to lead engagement efforts with women, or serve as a focal point for capturing women's perspectives.
	2	R8	Using women as community focal points for projects.
Training	15	R9	Providing specific training opportunities targeted at women.
Presence on committees	14	R10	Increasing women's numerical representation on committees (e.g. resource management) and associations (e.g. fishers, seafood vendors).
	3	R11	Creating or strengthening women's committees to address livelihoods, fisheries or broader natural resource management issues.
Gender assessments	18	R12	Undertaking site-level gender assessments, socioeconomic surveys of women in the fisheries sector, and includes working with women to collect fisheries data.
Learning networks	3	R13	Supporting cross-learning between women through site exchange visits, or the hosting of national or subnational forums for women.
Tradition and cultures	2	R14	Fostering or using traditional approaches that are more inclusive of women, or provide a mechanism for women to input into decision-making.
Women's projects	19	R15, B1	Developing livelihood projects specifically targeted at women to ensure there are clear benefits to them. These projects focus on upgrading skills or access to markets, or providing alternatives to reduce fishing pressure.
	8	R16, B2	Developing projects that target fisheries that women dominate in, or are traditionally seen as "women's fisheries".
Funding	8	B3	Creating mechanisms for women to access funds for livelihoods (fishing, non-fishing) through granting or loan mechanisms.
Shared decision-making	2	E1	Fostering women-men partnerships and collective or shared decision-making, where women's perspectives shape outcomes.
Gender norm transformation	2	T1	Developing programs that specifically aim to change the attitudes and behaviour of men towards women, within social and cultural contexts.

We found 16 different approaches to reach women, three to benefit women, one to empower women, and one to transform gender norms (Table 2). Numerically, reach approaches were listed more frequently by respondents (n=135, 68%), followed by benefit (n=55, 28%), empower (n=6, 3%) and transform (n=2, 1%). There was a large skew towards community consultation practice, particularly efforts to increase the number of women at community meetings and workshops, in order to get the viewpoints or perspectives of women, or to hold separate focal group discussions to enable women to speak more freely (Fig. 1, Table 2). Only two respondents described "empower" approaches used to foster working partnerships between men and women to encourage decisions to be made jointly or collectively. "Transform" approaches to change the attitudes and behaviours of men were described by two respondents in Fiji. One specifically worked to change male attitudes toward women, for instance, encouraging men to recognise the significance of women's roles as natural resource stewards and become champions for the inclusion of women in natural resource decisions at the community level, and the other sought to work with men to address gender-based violence in Suva.

After reflecting on the approaches used, we asked respondents to rate their organisation's capacity to include gender in their programmes or policies along a five-point Likert scale (i.e. Very Poor, Poor, Neither Good or Poor, Good, Very Good), and provide a justification or explanation for their ranking. Despite gender inclusion approaches trending toward the "reach" end of the spectrum, the majority of respondents (62.7%) perceived their organisation's capacity for gender inclusion as "Good" or "Very Good" (Table 1). With the exception of experts in Solomon Islands, less than 20% of respondents gave themselves a "Poor" or "Very Poor" ranking. A respondent from the Solomon Islands government explained her high ranking: "All the women staff can inform their own work plans." In contrast, a respondent from the Fiji government explained that he gave a low ranking because "No expertise. No demand. No drive for gender. No consequences if [gender] is not included. Not in people's KPIs [key performance indicators]." A respondent from a global agency explained: "Policy and [on] paper is a 5 [Very Good], and implementation is a 2 [Poor]."

Gender barriers

We asked respondents to list up to three main barriers their organisation faced when it came to including gender in their organisational practice and SSF projects and programmes. We then identified 28 barriers and aggregated these into eight distinct categories (listed from highest to lowest ranking, based on the frequency of responses): 1) gender capacity (i.e. of individuals, of organisations, and access to capacity externally); 2) institutional culture, including individual values and biases; 3) inadequate human or financial resources; 4) poor gender institutionalisation; 5) culture and traditions; 6) gender norms at the community level; 7) insufficient data or evidence; and 8) incoherence of gender in legislation and policy.

Capacity for gender inclusion was reported as the largest barrier overall (85.3% of respondents). A respondent from an international NGO in Solomon Islands reported there are "not enough staff for what we want to do. We need a gender focal point for our office working on this full time, not just me trying to fit this into my role". Limited gender capacity was expressed in reference to individual respondents themselves and their organisations, citing issues with access to external gender expertise. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (64.7%) reported that they had no opportunities to build their gender capacity over the past 12 months. Government staff in Solomon Islands had greater opportunity, with 75% reporting receiving gender training in the last 12w's work". One woman in government complained that men used safety, physical strength or menstrual cycles as reasons why women were not suited to scuba diving. Women's abilities to attain senior leadership positions were reported as particularly challenging within government institutions, which are male-dominated across the three countries. A respondent from an international organisation reported: "It is hard to institute any changes [within own organisation]. Women at the senior level are left out of decision-making." Interestingly, some women found it was older women with more traditional views on women's roles in community and society that were "bullying" or creating barriers to women's leadership in their respective countries.

Inadequate human or financial resources was ranked high by respondents. This was highlighted by respondents working in NGOs who lamented that much of the gender-related funding in the Pacific is geared towards addressing domestic violence issues, and was not accessible to fisheries programmes or organisations. More than half of respondents (52.9%) reported that gender was poorly institutionalised within their organisations. Specifically, respondents referred to the lack of processes in place to mainstream gender (particularly within fisheries ministries), inadequate gender-specific budget allocation, lack of women in leadership positions, and the responsibility for gender inclusion resting with a few unqualified and junior individuals. Respondents working in fisheries ministries reported that their superiors and colleagues saw gender as the work of the Ministry of Women. Many stated culture and traditions (38.2% of respondents) and/or gender norms (32.4% of respondents) within communities were strong barriers to discussing and addressing gender equity in SSF management and development.

Discussion

With increasing efforts to meaningfully and appropriately address gender inequalities within SSF, there is a growing need to evaluate the ways in which organisations approach gender. The approaches and tools used by organisations can have a profound influence and impact on outcomes, including gender equality in the SSF sector. Our analysis finds that SSF organisations operating in Melanesia approach gender inclusion in diverse ways. Although well-intentioned, these approaches are restricted by various

Women's focus group discussion, Solomon Islands. ©Sarah Lawless

barriers, which mean that current efforts may not be appropriate for adequately addressing inequalities in SSF.

We found the majority of approaches used by SSF organisations in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu were targeted toward women, and rarely considered men or gender relations. Gender inclusion approaches were designed to reach women, but few women benefited from them, and almost none empowered women or used a transformative approach to address the root causes of gender inequality in the sector. For example, "reach" approaches featured strongly in community consultation practices, where increasing the number of women at meetings was a key strategy used and an indicator of success. Reliance on this approach, however, is unhelpful as inviting more women does not necessary result in equal participation, especially if cultural norms or different communication styles prevent women from speaking out, or being in the same room as certain male members of their family (Cornwall 2003; Dyer 2018).

The predominate focus on women through "reach" approaches is consistent with other studies where the conflation of gender with women occurs systemically in global, regional and national policy instruments being used in the Pacific (Lawless et al. 2021). Managers and practitioners mistakenly position women as inherently vulnerable and inferior to men, rather than contextualised in gendered environments (e.g. household, community, society) where their vulnerability is an outcome of oppressive and exploitative norms, power relations, structures and processes (Sultana 2014). This is problematic as it excludes men in the conceptualisation of gender, fails to recognise men as part of the problem, or provide them the opportunity to be part of the solution. Consequently, they can in fact become "blockers" of much needed change (Lombardo and Meier 2008).

The focus on reach approaches likely stems from managers' and practitioners' (and their organisations') hesitancy and concerns that if they advocate for gender equality too strongly, too quickly or incorrectly within coastal communities, they may do more harm (e.g. increase gender-based violence, further reduce women's rights) or be asked to leave. While these concerns are valid, much progress has been made toward progressing gender transformative change (i.e. those that seek to challenge unequal and harmful structures and norms that underpin gender inequalities), that account for these sensitivities (e.g. Hillenbrand 2015).

Respondents reported that the lack of capacity to include gender by individuals, fisheries organisations, and across the

Gender equity in coastal fisheries will ensure everyone benefits fairly.

WCS

Women fishers in Fiji are increasingly using boats to go fishing. ©Shiri Ram

SSF sector more broadly, stemmed from: 1) receiving little to no training (including at senior level); 2) having poor access to gender experts; and 3) lacking practical tools to guide them. Despite low capacity (as evidenced by the predominant reach approaches used), the majority of fisheries managers and practitioners ranked their internal organisational capacity for gender inclusion as high. This is problematic because it reinforces approaches that are, at best, tokenistic (Lawless et al. 2021), and at worst may be reinforcing or widening inequalities in the SSF sector, particularly for women. Our findings suggest that the bar for including gender in SSF management and development is currently set very low, with no benchmark for what is acceptable practice, and

further emphasises the need to build the capacity of fisheries managers and practitioners in gender-inclusive best practices.

We found gender inclusion was limited by institutional culture, including individual values and biases. This manifests in a number of ways, including the type of work assigned to female versus male staff, the predominant selection of women for gender training, and inherent male biases in appointments into senior leadership positions. This is consistent with other research that has shown institutions gendered with gender norms, beliefs and practices woven into the political fabric of organisational environments, further reinforced by organisational actors embedded within

them; in many cases, gender inequalities are upheld by institutional culture (Waylen 2014). Despite the investments by regional and global organisations to assist national governments with gender audits and assessments (e.g. SPC 2018a, b, c) and national policies in place to address gender inequality (Government of Fiji 2014; Government of Vanuatu 2015; Government of Solomon Islands 2016), gender was only weakly institutionalised within government and was recognised across organisations (especially by regional and global organisations) as a major barrier.

These findings suggest two important areas for investment to improve gender inclusion in the SSF sector - capacity and institutional culture. First, the number and diversity of organisations in Melanesia and the wider Pacific with a long history of working on gender provides a unique opportunity to build networks and partnerships to build capacity for gender inclusion in the SSF sector. Managers and practitioners in the Pacific have access to global agencies (e.g. UN Women), regional organisations (e.g. SPC) and international development organisations (e.g. Oxfam, Care International), with decades of gender and development expertise, as well as Pacific context-specific tools and materials that can be applied to the SSF sector (e.g. Barclay et al. 2019). Each country has a ministry mandated to oversee the implementation of national gender equality policies, and to support and promote the mainstreaming of gender into all sectors, including fisheries. Stronger collaborations and cross-sectoral learning with gender development organisations is perhaps one of the greatest untapped opportunities to build gender capacity in fisheries managers and practitioners, and benefit from decades of knowledge gained and lessons learned.

The second area of investment to improve gender inclusion relates to the organisational culture of fisheries organisations. Overcoming barriers related to institutional culture requires a systematic change to existing institutions and institutional practices, which go beyond recruiting more women, toolkits and checklist approaches. This may mean taking steps to remove outdated practices and legitimise new ones (Elgström, 2000), while challenging "institutional defenders who benefit from the organisations status quo" (Cold-Ravnkilde et al. 2018). Rather than gender equality being seen as a global principle enforced in a top-down manner, spaces need to be created for organisations and individuals to contest and negotiate what gender means in SSF practice, identifying gender advocates and resistors, and redefining organisational motivations, missions and values (Ferguson 2015; Lawless et al. 2020).

Conclusion

The approaches used by organisations working in SSF emphasise that the sector is very much in its infancy when it comes to addressing gender equality. Future efforts need to focus on addressing capacity gaps (e.g. the development of guidelines, tools and training programmes), which may involve connecting to existing gender and development networks, organisations and gender experts throughout the region. Gender inclusion in SSF management and development, however, is unlikely to be achieved without explicit shifts in institutional culture (especially at senior levels), strategy and systematic efforts to implement meaningful gender approaches with effective accountability mechanisms in place. Such a step can assist the transition from gender inclusive approaches being "new" to the "norm", while setting a benchmark for what is acceptable practice.

Acknowledgements

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