

An overview of I-Kiribati women in fisheries

Ioanna Gotschall¹

Introduction

The livelihoods and food security of Kiribati's people, or I-Kiribati, depend significantly on marine resources due to the limited amount of arable land. All men and women in Kiribati participate in fishing activities, whether it is aquaculture, gleaning, harvesting, hook-and-line fishing, gillnetting, spearing, trapping, diving or deep-sea boat fishing (MFMRD 2020; MFMRD and SPC 2019). Marine resources sustain the diets of I-Kiribati and increasingly provide income to communities with few other available economic opportunities (Tekanene 2005, 2006; Lambeth et al. 2006). Although the Kiribati Constitution guarantees rights to women, it supports a cultural practice that distances women from decision-making processes such as village, island and government councils (GoK 2009; UN Women 2020). Women's lack of representation in local governments (only 10 out of 332 Island Councilors are women) is important because under the Local Government Act of 1984 (Kiribati National Statistics Office 2016), Island Councils control nearshore resources within three nautical miles, which are the primary fishing grounds of women (MFMRD 2020). Consequently, women's fisheries have historically been excluded in local government discussions and in overall national policies.

I-Kiribati women support their families with their fishing activities, and should receive institutional recognition and support for doing so (Fay-Sauni and Sauni 2005; Tekanene 2006; MFMRD and SPC 2019). An inability to participate in community decision-making, and underrepresentation in coastal fishery activities increases poverty among women and worsens associated vulnerabilities such as unemployment, domestic violence, and food insecurity for I-Kiribati families (Dekens 2017; Kronen and Vunisea 2007; UN Women 2020). The Government of Kiribati (GoK), the United Nations (UN) and the Pacific Community (SPC) acknowledge that the underrepresentation of women in traditional local government hierarchies has contributed to the dramatic decline of coastal fishery stocks such as the bivalve arc shell *Anadara holoserica* (*te bun*) (Fay-Sauni and Sauni 2005; Gillett 2016; Gillett and Tauati 2018; GoK 2014). Lack of representation of women *Anadara* fishers on the Tarawa Urban Council has allowed the devaluation of coastal resources such as the arc shell, and has further enabled coastal pollution and overexploitation (Fay-Sauni and Sauni 2005). It is critical that women's fishing grounds and activities are considered in every coastal development project, especially projects in urban South Tarawa. Such projects must first work

within cultural norms to give women freedom of choice (empowerment) in the economy, within their families, and society while also ensuring local support and the implementation of community-based fisheries management (CBFM). Of course, cultural norms must evolve in order to accommodate women's important roles in coastal fisheries. Valuing the organisms that women traditionally harvest is an important initial step for increasing women's esteem and status in their families, villages and local governments.

This paper discusses two projects that attempt to address poverty reduction through recommended income-generating activities (IGAs) among I-Kiribati women: the UN Women's "Women Economic Empowerment" (WEE) programme, and the Pacific Regional Oceanscape Program (PROP). These projects signify notable progress towards gender equity in Kiribati, specifically by recognising women's roles in the economy and in promoting food security for their families. The WEE Feasibility Study, however, excludes women's marine-based activities from income-generating activity (IGA) recommendations (Caulfield 2018). This is an important omission because WEE continues to influence Kiribati policy. PROP does



¹ Ioanna Gotschall, BA Environmental Studies. Email: ioanna-gotschall1@gmail.com

a better job of highlighting women's role in fisheries but reflects the national prioritisation of women's involvement in offshore fisheries development. This paper discusses how these reports omit women's role in fisheries and how future reports should attempt to work within cultural contexts to promote and support gender equality in Kiribati.

Women's economic empowerment thus far: Recognising women in fisheries

The WEE programme is a valuable step toward addressing vulnerability to poverty among women, especially in Kiribati (Swanepoel et al. 2020). Through its Markets for Change (M4C) project, UN Women and the Government of Australia aim to alleviate the economic and resulting social disparity between men and women in the marketplace (Caulfield 2018; UN Women 2020). WEE also aims to identify and develop sustainable economic opportunities among women in Pacific Island countries, specifically in marketplaces. The WEE Feasibility Study (Caulfield 2018) for Kiribati identified viable IGAs and made recommendations that worked within Kiribati's cultural context. Recommended IGAs followed gender norms for women such as sewing, cooking, baking, gardening and food processing, in an effort to develop women's freedom of choice in society and the economy (Caulfield 2018). A recommendation that does not directly target women in fisheries, but may apply, includes developing revolving funds for women's collaborative business ventures and financing.

Group members may take turns receiving, for instance, all the profits from a week's worth of produced goods (e.g. sewn garments). This common group financing method is practiced throughout Kiribati and the Pacific among families and friends and proves promising for women in fisheries. WEE hopes to address food insecurity and vulnerability to poverty by supporting culturally appropriate women's IGAs but neglects to mention women's fishing activities anywhere in the Feasibility Study (Caulfield 2018). Instead, Caulfield focuses on relatively home-based IGAs and women's secondary role in post-harvest activities and finfish sales. A lack of coastal fisheries data and reporting of women's marine-based activities may be responsible for the omission of marine-based IGAs from Caulfield's (2018) recommendations. Nonetheless, it is an important omission because WEE heavily influences Kiribati's gender-related policy. Reviewing and updating the WEE Feasibility Study to include women's marine-based activities in IGA recommendations will likely be mirrored in national policies and development goals.

Recommendations in the WEE Feasibility Study (Caulfield 2018) are referenced in the following policies: Kiribati National Gender Equality and Women's Development 2019–2022 (GEWD), the Kiribati 20-Year Vision (KV20), and the Kiribati National Fisheries Plan 2013–2025 (KNFP). The listed policies take steps in the right direction for women's economic empowerment but do not address women in fisheries (e.g. GEDW), nor work with the participation barriers that women face in fisheries (e.g.



A woman selling tuna. ©Johann Bell



A woman selling bonefish at a roadside stall. ©Johann Bell

the KV20 and KNFP). Mention of women or gender in either the KV20 and KNFP is in the context of offshore fisheries development (either prostitution or fish market facilities) (GoK 2014, 2016), but both set the stage for the most promising policy to date: Kiribati National Coastal Fisheries Roadmap 2019–2036. For example, the KV20 phrases gender as a “cross-cutting issue” that simultaneously poses competition from other cross-cutting priorities over already scarce resources and capacity (Dekens 2017), and sets up the networks for the multi-sectoral communication and coordination. Similarly, although the KNFP focused on women in relation to offshore fisheries, it established pilot projects that have informed the recent Kiribati National Coastal Fisheries Roadmap.

By definition, gender mainstreaming requires multi-sectoral cooperation in order to ensure equal opportunity, representation and benefits for all levels of society. Viable solutions posed under the cross-cutting issues of the KV20 and KNFP include ensuring gender issues are addressed in CBFM processes, and ensuring equal access to micro-financing opportunities. CBFM has crucially provided a communication platform for local council members and government officials, wherein traditional meeting etiquettes of the *maneaba way* are integrated to lessen the tension and intimidation factor that local representatives feel during formal briefings with government officials (Uriam 2016). Although *maneaba* (meeting house) directly translates to “land of men”, CBFM is redefining *maneaba* etiquette to include women. Consequently, CBFM is helping to evolve the structures of local governments through direct contact with senior ministry officials (where women and men are

more equally represented). During CBFM pilot projects, I-Kiribati communities identified women’s target species, including arc shells (*Anadara* spp. *te bun*), cockles (*Strombus* spp. *te nouo*), and peanut worms (*Sipunculus* spp. *te ibo*) as important marine species in need of community management (Awira et al. 2004; Delisle et al. 2016). Although such invertebrates have been identified in past surveys (Awira et al. 2004; Kiareti et al. 2015), CBFM has allowed communities to express the need for management of such invertebrates and associated habitats.

The Kiribati National Coastal Fisheries Roadmap is a direct result of, and is informed by, CBFM activities (MFMRD and SPC 2019). The Roadmap takes the next step to mainstream gender in fisheries by identifying women in its first key priority for coastal fisheries development. It was developed to support the KNFP and reflects efforts in the region under the Noumea Strategy to empower and support Pacific Island women in coastal fisheries. The 17-year strategy acknowledges the lack of support for women’s fishing activities and attempts to lay out a framework for encouraging sustainable community-based coastal fisheries management plans that benefit both men and women. Significantly, this is the first policy to enlist the cooperation of all Kiribati ministries, but specifically, the Ministry of Women, Youth, Sports and Social Affairs (MWYSSA) and MFMRD. The Roadmap generally suggests developing new and gender-inclusive fisheries cooperatives and activities but lacks specificity regarding women’s fisheries. Every development action promotes gender-awareness training but there is no mention of the invertebrate species that women exploit, such as bivalves, conches or peanut worms. Given the historical

omission of women's marine-based activities, it is especially important to prioritise women's fishing activities in fisheries development projects.

Pacific Islands Regional Oceanscape Program

The Pacific Islands Regional Oceanscape Program (PROP) is a six-year initiative implemented by MFMRD and funded by the Australian Center for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR). The project incorporates the goals of KNFP and KV20. It identifies women's role in shore-based fishing activities, processing, and marketing but only focuses on developing market infrastructure (e.g. bathrooms) and defining gender-based violence requirements in construction (MFMRD 2020). PROP's stakeholder engagement plan recognises women as valuable stakeholders and incorporates women's institutions such as MWYSSA for employment and legislative developments in fisheries; however, MWYSSA's Women Development Division is not mentioned anywhere in the final disclosure document. Under capacity-building activities, PROP requires gender-equitable training and capacity-building programmes, inclusive consultation and implementation of the project, and emphasises the need to increase women's participation in decision-making

platforms such as village and island councils. PROP has considerable potential for women's economic empowerment, with a few minor revisions. For instance, PROP follows sex-disaggregated survey techniques also practiced by CBFM to ensure inclusivity in project consultation and implementation (Delisle et al 2016). Separate consultations for men and women ensure that "sociocultural norms" such as the *unimwane* (elder men) structure of meetings do not stifle women's participation. However, there is still no mention of developing coastal resources that women exploit (e.g. arc shells, cockles, peanut worms, spiny oyster, and others).

Analysis

Traditional governing systems (e.g. *unimwane* associations and village councils) that distance women from decision-making also need to evolve to accommodate women's important role in coastal fisheries, otherwise, they will continue to hinder women's empowerment. Sex-disaggregated survey techniques employed by CBFM and the Kiribati National Coastal Fisheries Roadmap are slowly, but surely, highlighting women's concerns in fisheries and dismantling the local governing structures that impede women's empowerment. Currently, working with *unimwane* associations and village



Recording the amount of shellfish from gleaning efforts. ©K. Pakoa

councils means establishing at least one elected representative for women in each island council (Uriam and Delisle 2014). In the long run, recognising women's importance in coastal fisheries and their communities will elevate their status in their families and increase their participation in village and island councils in turn. Developing culturally acceptable fisheries activities for women will ensure support from the cultural framework that, to this day, inhibits women's participation in male-dominated fishery sectors. Including women's fishing activities under fisheries development goals will expand the concept of "fishing" beyond men's domain. Working within segregated norms is an initial step that ensures minimal backlash from a fiercely traditional nation like Kiribati. Granted, urbanisation has aided in dismantling gender roles (Thomas 2001, 2014; MFMRD 2020), however, urbanisation is limited to half the population. Ignoring inshore resources that feed women and their families will continue to disenfranchise half the population of women living in Kiribati's outer islands, and who are more dependent on subsistence (Molai et al. 2019). Within national and international efforts to empower women it is essential to emphasise women's role in securing food for their families. Instead of just integrating women into male-dominated fishing activities, working with traditionally gendered fishing roles to gradually transform women's position in fisheries is worth considering. Development goals of the National Kiribati Coastal Fisheries Roadmap and PROP can do a better job of employing women's traditional knowledge in gleaning and farming as well as women's vast social circles in order to build women's esteem in fisheries.

Currently, seaweed farming initiatives funded by ACIAR have begun emphasising I-Kiribati women in project implementation. Swanepoel et al. (2020) and Butcher et al. (2020) propose diversifying I-Kiribati diets with edible, native and commercial seaweeds such as sea-grapes (*Caulerpa* spp.) and red seaweed (*Kappaphycus* spp. and *Acanthophora* spp.). Seaweed farming, and other such initiatives, can serve as a starting point for expanding cultural and institutional support for developing other women's fishing activities like gleaning (Butcher et al. 2019; Swanepoel et al. 2020). The same tactics and frameworks used by CBFM projects and ACIAR seaweed initiatives can be employed to develop fisheries that are more accessible to women. For instance, seaweed requires a plot to farm, whereas mollusc fisheries require minimal tools, upkeep and ownership of a marine environment. Diversifying women's fishing activities will help more I-Kiribati families cope with the consequences of globalisation and climate change.

Although Caulfield (2018) and the Government of Kiribati (2019) recognise that domestic duties and child-rearing obligations impede women's IGAs, neither present alternatives that could alleviate such burdens (i.e. mechanisation or childcare services). Basic institutional infrastructure for women is championed, yet there are no initiatives for childcare or to mechanise mundane and time-consuming activities such as washing clothes or collecting firewood (GoK 2019). Of course, Kiribati's physical isolation hinders access to cheap modern technology. Striving to incorporate

technologies (besides fishing gear) that will enable women to transition into a working economy is important as Kiribati continues developing its basic infrastructure. Overall, the WEE Feasibility Study (Caulfield 2018) overlooks the opportunity to develop the only way most women have traditionally supplemented their family diets and income – through inshore fisheries activities. Because WEE affects so much of Kiribati's national policy, updating the Feasibility Study to include women's marine-based activities would improve gender-inclusive national fisheries policies.

National policy and international ideology have successfully brought the concept of gender equality, equity and empowerment to the forefront of discussion forums. Policies (i.e. KV20 and KNFP) and projects (i.e. WEE and PROP) commonly do not mention IGAs that currently serve to empower women and enhance food security for their families, such as inshore invertebrate gleaning and mariculture. Although initially incomplete, KV20 and KNFP laid the groundwork for CBFM projects and the gender-inclusive fisheries policies of the Kiribati National Coastal Fisheries Roadmap. However, there is still a need to evolve entrenched ideologies that keep women from participating in male-dominated, marine-based activities such as offshore fishing. For example, PROP mentions men's dominance in fishing activities without an explanation as to why women are underrepresented. This type of rhetoric perpetuates the idea that fishing is not "women's work". PROP needs to prioritise women's fisheries activities (specifically invertebrate gleaning and seaweed farming) instead of solely developing women's participation in offshore fisheries. Although the Roadmap offers more emphasis on women and gender-mainstreaming in coastal fisheries, it does not identify women's fisheries. Given the historical omission of women's marine-based activities (e.g. invertebrate gleaning), it is recommended that women's target species and fishing activities are specified, if not prioritised. This will ensure cultural cohesion with project goals and a higher rate of accomplishing local food security.

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