

# Looking at the impacts of COVID-19 on coastal communities in the Pacific using a gender and social inclusion lens

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had worldwide impacts, from high mortality rates to collapsed healthcare systems to economic disruptions at all levels. The Pacific Islands region is no exception but it has largely escaped (so far) the large number of cases, the collapse of healthcare systems, and – with the exception of Papua New Guinea and Fiji – a higher than usual number of deaths. Some of the impacts have been associated with supply chain disruptions; border closures and an accompanying delay of important industries such as tourism; and internal, mostly preventative, measures to stop the spread of the virus (Davila et al. 2021; Marre and Garcia 2021a; Sherzad 2020; SPC 2021). The Pacific is characterised by large swaths of ocean and scattered islands of diverse sizes. In general, this means that the majority of communities are coastal and depend on coastal and marine resources for food consumption, raw materials and income generation. These communities are usually rural and have limited access to resources and services.

The pandemic has had varying effects on the diverse segments of the population, and existing inequalities have often been exacerbated (Bennett et al. 2020). Several studies have specifically explored the impacts of COVID-19 on these coastal communities in the Pacific (e.g. Ferguson et al. 2022; Marre and Garcia 2021a). A few of them have made a specific effort to understand how the pandemic has both directly or indirectly affected different groups within communities, in particular, men, women, youth, and less often, some marginalised groups, such as disabled people or migrants in coastal communities. In this article we conducted a literature review of studies that have tried to understand how the impacts of COVID-19 have differed across genders and other segments of fishing communities. We analysed the selected documents according to the following predetermined elements: specific impacts on women, men, youth and children, and on marginalised groups. We also looked at the key elements of each of these groups that have increased resilience in the face of crises and that could help optimise recovery and development aid into the future. We included a few documents that were not specific to the region, but were included here because they describe gender-specific impacts of COVID-19 in coastal communities worldwide, or in other regions that we believe may have faced similar impacts (e.g. Africa), although limited comparative research is available. If not stated otherwise, the results refer to the Pacific Islands region. The literature review is by no means comprehensive, but it provides a broader view of the

segregated impacts of COVID-19 in the region. With this view, it is possible to make recommendations to address the issues in an inclusive way, and to provide aid to increase or recover the resilience of coastal communities through future development programmes.

## Results

Global impacts of COVID-19 (e.g. disrupted supply chains, economic crises and unemployment), combined with national measures to control the spread of the virus (border closures, lockdowns and curfews), have had a strong negative effect on income levels of coastal communities (Bennett et al. 2020). In the Pacific, several vicious cycles became evident, where reduced income and higher costs of fishing resulted in less commercial fishing and reduced sales in some cases, but most likely increased subsistence and opportunistic fishing (for an example from Tonga that illustrates these feedbacks, see Fig. 1 in Marre and Garcia 2021a). The impacts on seafood stocks in the region are unknown, and the future resilience of fishing communities may have been affected. Some alternative livelihoods were also affected, such as aquaculture (SPC 2021) and tourism (Sherzad 2020). Other livelihoods, however, provided relief in times of hardship, namely agriculture, handicraft-making and new businesses or marketing methods (LMMA Network et al. 2020c; Marre and Garcia 2021a).

## Gender issues concerning women

From those documents that did explore the specific issues according to gender and age, some clear impacts were evident throughout the Pacific region. For example, job security tended to be lower for women than for men even before COVID-19, which has made them more vulnerable during the crisis (Bennett et al. 2020; Davila et al. 2021; Eriksson et al. 2020; Mangubhai et al. 2021; Minahal et al. 2020; Naggea et al. 2021; O'Leary 2021; Tuivuna 2020). A large proportion of women work in the informal labour market, in various steps along the fishing sector value chain, although some of them are overlooked. These include pre-harvest activities, fishing, fish processing and direct sales (Barclay et al. 2021). Most countries in the Pacific lack social security beyond formal employment (FAO 2021), so those women, particularly those who are disabled, elderly, single mothers and widows, become especially vulnerable to loss of income under harsh environmental and socioeconomic circumstances.

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During the pandemic, unpaid household chores and care duties increased, particularly for women (Davila et al. 2021; Eriksson et al. 2020; Pacific Women 2021; UN Women 2020a), because household members, including children not attending school, spent more time at home. This was exacerbated by internal migration patterns, where people who were living in more urban areas to work or study, lost their jobs or had to stop their studies, and move back to rural and coastal areas (Marre and Garcia 2021a; Pacific Women 2021). These additional people in the household represented increased work, such as cooking, washing clothes and taking care of children, disabled or elderly. One study, however, highlights that both men and women in Samoa reported being able to share responsibilities with other members of the household, particularly partners (UN Women 2020a). This support from other household members was not explored in other studies but is an important feature of the social fabric that helps households and communities endure through different crises.

Another reported issue of internal migration was overfishing (Marre and Garcia 2021a). Because the main occupation of incoming people was not necessarily fishing, they most likely lacked access to the necessary resources to fish beyond the nearshore areas (boats, money for fuel, specialised fishing gear). Those coastal areas are more often used by women (Eriksson et al. 2020), and newcomers may have a disproportional effect on fish and invertebrate stocks, which are particularly important for feeding families (Thomas et al. 2021). When schools closed, more children were also targeting these zones (LMMA Network et al. 2020c). It is unknown as to what extent this extra pressure has affected resource stocks, particularly considering that in some places, even regulations were lifted to ease the hardship of rural communities (Solomon Islands Government 2021). The most important concern is if the resilience of those sites has been reduced and the future provision of food and income is compromised. Presumably, this longer-term impact could reduce women fishers' catches and affect their food security as they often come from households that rely on marine resources as a key source of protein. Poverty risks could also be associated with those households that have no alternative ways of securing food.

This topic is related to another concern reported by some women who feel that their ability to provide food to their families has been reduced, either through subsistence fisheries and agriculture, or through the ability to purchase food (Davila et al. 2021; LMMA Network et al. 2020c; Marre and Garcia 2021a). Food security is often a bigger concern for women due to their associated gender role to cater to, feed and nurture families and communities. Women's ability to adjust, adapt and reinvent ways to secure food is often triggered in extreme situations such as natural disasters or a pandemic. Thus, women may take on new or different roles in these situations (e.g. venturing into small businesses or starting small-scale farming initiatives) that allow them to continue to put food on the table. Food security is then a key element, that relates to multiple Sustainable Development

Goals (i.e. poverty, food security, health and wellbeing) and requires a systems approach to address the variety of factors at play, such as an over-dependence on certain food items, and vulnerability to climate disasters and other crises. Limited food security puts at risk the resilience and integrity of rural communities, as people move out of the community to search for new opportunities.

Finally, around the world, several reports indicate a worrying increase in domestic violence associated with COVID-19-related financial and psychological stresses (UN Women 2020a), particularly on women, children and disabled people. The levels of domestic violence in some Pacific Island countries are among the highest in the world (Pacific Women 2021; UN Women 2020b). For example, in Fiji, some news outlets have reported a spike in domestic violence linked to COVID-19 (APR editor 2021; RNZ 2020). Several problems perpetuate this practice, including cultural acceptance of violence and the sensitivity of the issue that makes working directly with families extremely difficult. Interventions are often seen as intrusions into the private lives of affected households. Pacific women fishers and households where women rely strongly on marine resources for food or income are often from rural areas, with no or limited access to support services for gender-based violence survivors. The worries, anxieties and uncertainties associated to this pandemic are worsened by different forms of violence, and represent key barriers for women's successful ability to cope, adapt and build resilience.

## A gender lens to explore opportunities – a focus on women

Several of the issues faced by women are not new, but COVID-19 has exacerbated many of them. Opportunities to address some of these issues have become evident due to the pandemic. One important point mentioned in several cases was the importance of close networks such as family, weaving groups and religious groups, among others (LMMA Network et al. 2020c). While some of these networks might have no means to influence structural changes, they provide key support during times of crisis, such as food sharing and psychological wellbeing. Such networks are also essential for increasing the social sustainability of any external intervention.

Another positive point mentioned was the importance to women of sustaining their families through the crisis, by providing food for the family, but also income. A significant number of women were involved in fishing activities and agriculture, which increased the likelihood of the family of having access to nutritious foods, even in the face of market shortages and financial hardship. In addition, several women led new activities that supported their household's income. Some of these new activities included new sales of fishing and agriculture products; innovative marketing strategies such as selling directly to consumers rather than in the market;

establishing new agricultural projects such as growing pandanus, vanilla or kava; and new handicraft-making projects and businesses, such as weaving mats (LMMA Network et al. 2020a; LMMA Network et al. 2020c; Marre and Garcia 2021a).

Finally, a study by UN Women (2020a) showed that in Samoa, more women than men reported receiving support from government and non-governmental organisations. If this is the case in other countries in the region, this can be a catalyst to empower women to support their families and communities through the establishment of new income-generating activities, better management of their natural resources, and pertinent training to target their specific needs.

## Issues pertaining to children and youth

Due to the increase in domestic violence reported since the pandemic started, and particularly in the Pacific Islands region where physical punishment is widespread (Suthanthiraraj 2019), several children and youth have been subject to forced labour, and lived in violent environments, particularly in Asia and the Pacific (Bennett et al. 2020). Because schools and otherwise sanctuary zones such as churches were closed for varying periods of time, younger children and adults were unable to escape, even if temporarily, from violent situations. The consequences of being raised in such conditions are long lasting, and include learning and psychological issues, and the perpetuation of violent relationships into the future (Suthanthiraraj 2019). While both boys and girls are subject to violent punishment, Suthanthiraraj (2019) highlighted that girls and young women are more likely to be victims of sexual abuse.

Nutritional issues associated with reduced access to food can also have long lasting consequences on the physical and intellectual development of children (FAO 2021). In the Pacific region, several studies indicate that some women were concerned they would not be able to provide food for their families; for example, 65% of participants reported not having enough food in Papua New Guinea (LMMA Network et al. 2020b); over half of participants identified the availability of fish and seafood as a stress in Tonga (Marre and Garcia 2021b); and one-fifth of Indo-Fijians reported not having enough food (Mangubhai et al. 2021). The compound effects of COVID-19 and other disasters, drastically reduced the ability of communities to provide enough food to children, as illustrated by an example from Mauritius, off the African continent (Naggea et al. 2021).

The disruption of education due to the pandemic has been felt across the world, including the Pacific. Some stories emerged from the documents analysed, where young adults who were planning or were in the process of pursuing higher education, had to abandon their studies and either take low-paid jobs or return home and get involved in agriculture or fishing (Eriksson et al. 2020; Marre and Garcia 2021b). Many children missed school in the Pacific, particularly in places with extended lockdowns. In addition to school closures, many parents could not afford to pay school fees, meals or transport, and opted not to send their kids to

school once they reopened (Gounder and Narayan 2021). In the long term, it is still unknown how the missing months at school, particularly for those without internet, will affect education in the region, and future educational and employment opportunities. For many, this could represent missed opportunities to improve their education and access higher paying jobs (Davila et al. 2021).

## Gender issues concerning men

Very few studies touched on specific impacts felt by men, rather than the household or the community. In fact, in studies that looked specifically at impacts on mental health in general, issues were reported more often by men than women (Marre and Garcia 2021b; UN Women 2020a). Some reported being locked in overseas jobs, separated from their families and friends for long periods of time. In the case of seafarers from Kiribati who were stranded in Fiji, they could not go home, and they were not being paid for work either (Wasuka 2021). For those working on offshore fishing vessels, a reduced pool of workers due to travelling restrictions and the effort of some companies to reduce costs, has meant that these workers often have had to cover multiple shifts, with no proper rest or psychological support from families in between trips. This in turn reduced safety at sea (FAO 2021). While it was not explicitly mentioned in the analysed documents, there are certain subgroups of men that are likely to face more hardship than traditional heads of households, who have a supporting family. These include, for example, single fathers, widowers, men who lost their jobs and members of marginalised groups, such as the poorest members of a community (Marre and Garcia 2021b).

## A gender lens to explore opportunities – a focus on men

A few opportunities emerged from the documents, including the key role that men played in new livelihood ventures, particularly regarding new fishing methods (Marre and Garcia 2021a). Several women in Samoa reported that their partners and other male household members helped them with household chores, and this was likely the case in other places in the Pacific, even if the question was not asked in other studies (UN Women 2020a).

## Recommendations

Considering the differentiated impacts that COVID-19 has had across different gender groups, age ranges and possibly other subgroups within communities, it becomes important to develop assessments, monitoring programmes and interventions to specifically address the segregated impacts, but also to design more efficient support systems that make the most of the opportunities that each segment of a community can offer for the benefit of the household or the community. This is relevant not only to support the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, but also to understand the level of resilience in the face of a diversity of future potential crises (e.g. climate change

risks, natural disasters, economic and political disturbances) and increase such resilience into the future. Some specific recommendations that emerge from this review are provided below.

- A biophysical assessment of the natural resources on which rural communities usually depend might be necessary to evaluate whether specific regulations or recovery programmes are needed to recuperate or improve productivity, particularly in cases in which it was affected by the overflow of people towards coastal communities. In doing so, the roles of women and men and their different use of coastal spaces, targeting different species and relying differently on marine resources for food or income or cultural or medicinal reasons need to be factored in so that human impacts and social dimensions of stock pressure can be understood and addressed.
- Monitoring programmes can help determine the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on different variables, particularly when it occurred in combination with other disasters (Mangubhai et al. 2021; Naggea et al. 2021). Such programmes should cover the main areas of wellbeing (e.g. livelihoods, food security, physical and psychological health, development of children) and sustainability (e.g. natural productivity, ecosystem vulnerability and resilience, ecosystem services). Such monitoring programmes can also evaluate the benefits of preventative programmes when compared to recovery programmes, and can inform how best to address future crises by preparing communities to cope with them.
- Assessments and studies should not neglect positive aspects and existing opportunities, even when focusing on crisis situations. These positive aspects are often the key to optimising development programmes. From the references in this literature review, such opportunities include robust social networks, resourcefulness and innovative thinking, the importance of training and other upskilling options, and the differentiated roles played by men and women in establishing coping mechanisms. It is also important to take into account the existing strengths that communities in the Pacific have, regardless of gender or age. For example, food sharing was an important feature that in some places was affected by food shortages, social distancing measures and fear of the virus, but that in general provided support not only to relatives, but to vulnerable people in the community such as widows (LMMA Network et al. 2020c; Marre and Garcia 2021a).
- The issue of domestic violence, however, remains an ongoing concern, as it is culturally accepted in some countries in the region (e.g. Suthanthiraj 2019; UNDP 2019), and it has crosscutting impacts on individuals and communities. Addressing this problem requires more than specific, short-term projects. A combined effort of government agencies, non-governmental organisations, local leaders, private sectors, and international agencies is needed to develop a long-term effort to change attitudes and behaviours across generations. The Pacific islands region has invested in many ways to combat domestic violence, especially in prevention (Young 2021). While some Pacific Island countries have also adopted specific

legal frameworks to address domestic violence and close legal gaps, it is still quite relevant to acknowledge the slow uptake of implementation measures and the persisting practices of acceptance and forgiveness. From a coastal fisheries point of view, domestic and gender violence needs to be understood as a cancerous matter that restricts both women's and men's full potential to function and contribute in any role they may play in the context of small-scale fisheries. Gender-based violence has often been referred to as "everybody's business" (Fiji Women's Crisis Centre 2013), and in that sense, a coastal community's ability to cope, to adapt and to reinvent itself in order to be resilient with outside stressors also depends on a safe and healthy environment that upholds respect, equality and dignity of individuals as they form the Pacific's communal safety net in the end.

- In more general terms, development programmes should evaluate ways of increasing the resilience of communities and the ecosystems on which they depend. Several studies indicate that a synergy of factors can contribute to such resilience, including, but not limited to: diversity of livelihood options for both income generation and for securing sufficient nutritious food and other basic necessities; innovative and diverse financial mechanisms, including traditional and informal sources, to support the development of alternative livelihoods; increased access to formal education, but also informal capacity-building programmes that take into the accounts the wants and needs of different sectors of each community (men, women, youth, marginalised groups); and bonding, bridging and linking social networks, including existing traditional practices that help communities endure crises. A long-term, collaborative approach that understands the whole food system and integrates different sectors and the different members of a community, can contribute to increase resilience and sustainability of coastal communities in the region.

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