

Gleaning the expanse: Gender and invisibilised dimensions of fisheries in American Samoa

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Abstract

The role of gender and gendered social systems within fisheries is an understudied topic, limiting the scope of our understanding of fisheries and their overarching socioecological systems and perpetuating marginalisation along gender lines. To elucidate the dimensions of fisheries that are often invisibilised⁴ under dominant approaches to studying fisheries, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 28 women and *fa'afafine*⁵ in American Samoa about their fisheries practices and their broader relations and interactions with the seas. Four key themes from the interviews were: 1) the significance of intergenerational relationships for the perpetuation of fishing knowledges and practices; 2) the critical role of cultural subsistence in the form of locally caught fish for elder care; 3) the cultural prominence of fisheries-related practices that would usually be excluded from fisheries studies, particularly domestic labour, art, and design; and 4) the need for a more expansive understanding of, and engagement with, gender in order to include the experiences and insights of people of all genders, particularly those outside of the dominant binary categorisation imposed especially on Indigenous communities via colonialism.

Introduction

Fisheries research tends to focus on fishing as it is predominantly understood, as a masculinised practice, and the men who fish in such ways (Kleiber et al. 2015; Weeratunge et al. 2010). Practices interpreted as feminine, such as gleaning and cooking, are often left out of analyses and subsequent management considerations (Kleiber et al. 2015; Weeratunge et al. 2010). These gendered biases perpetuate inaccurate depictions of socioecological systems by dismissing women from the narrative of who participates in fisheries, how fisheries function across geographies and time, and the complex relationalities people hold with the seascape. Such biases in research and management can leave women who participate in fisheries marginalised and underprioritised for management intervention and resource distribution. Furthermore, even when a gender-conscious approach is taken for studying fisheries, where the experiences and insights of women are sought and focused on, researchers and managers can impose and perpetuate an interpretation of gender that fails to consider or include the experiences and insights of people who do not conform to binary gender norms. Not only are these people excluded, but Indigenous cultural manifestations of gender are further invisibilised, thereby reinforcing colonial efforts of cultural erasure. Such erasure not only limits the breadth and accuracy of studies into fisheries and seascape relationalities, but also severely truncates the potential efficacy and equity of resulting management actions (or inactions). In this article, “seascape relationalities” refer to the varied and interconnected ways people relate to and interact with all aspects of the seas – tangible and intangible – and at all scales, from personal to societal, including the beliefs and values that inform and are informed by these relationships.

To gain a better understanding of how gendered dynamics intersect with, are informed by, and elucidate otherwise hidden dynamics of fisheries and their overarching socioecological systems, we focused our research on American Samoa. As a territory of the United States, colonialism and capitalism have transformed, and continue to transform, the socioecological seascape of the islands, particularly in regards to fisheries. Additionally, American Samoa, like other United States island territories and commonwealths, occupies a liminal political space where residents are not afforded the full rights of citizens living in a US state, but US federal regulations are applied to their surrounding exclusive economic zone. Territorial communities have been identified as underserved fisheries communities by the National Marine Fisheries Service Equity and Environmental Justice Strategy (in prep), in acknowledgement of the marginalisation of territorial fisheries research and management. Such marginalisation also manifests in the invisibilisation of subsistence and cultural fishing practices in research and management considerations. This work is part of a larger effort to devote more intentional and rigorous attention to American Samoa to ensure that cultural fishing practices flourish into perpetuity.

For this project, we interviewed women and *fa'afafine* in American Samoa about their fishing practices and the various ways they relate with the seascape, whether through certain cultural practices, beliefs or insights they hold about the seas, or anything else of particular interest to the interviewees. These interviews were conducted to help gather knowledge about the dynamics of gender and fisheries in American Samoa, both in terms of how gendered social systems affect seascape relationalities, and how focusing on gender groups often excluded from fisheries studies can reveal invisibilised aspects of fisheries and their socioecological systems.

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4 The term invisibilise means to marginalise or otherwise erase the presence, contributions or issues pertaining to an individual, group or phenomena.

5 *Fa'afafine* is a third gender within traditional Samoan culture. *Fa'afafine* are assigned male at birth, but do not identify as men, and some identify as trans women (McMullin and Kihara 2018).

Naomi Matagi interviewed 28 people between July and September 2022. Interviewees' experiences and locations of residence spanned much of the geography of the islands. Interviews were conducted in Samoan or English, depending on the interviewee's preference. Matagi translated Samoan interviews into English for analysis. In several cases, Matagi found that interviewees were more willing to speak when they were not being audio recorded; in those cases, interviews were documented via handwritten notes taken by Matagi during and after the interview.

The interviews were semi-structured, with several guiding questions pertaining to fishing practices in particular, such as who taught the interviewee to fish, which marine taxa they target, and how they like to prepare and distribute their catch. The interviews flowed conversationally based on interviewees' interests and individualities. Though focused on fishing practices themselves, the interviewees also touched on many interrelated subjects such as cooking and distributing catch, marine education, and the role of the ocean in art and design. From these interviews, four key themes emerged and are discussed herein: 1) the intergenerational perpetuation of fishing knowledge and practice; 2) the role of cultural subsistence for elder care; 3) the intersection of domestic labour and art with fisheries; and 4) the situatedness of *fā'afafine* within fisheries and seascape relationalities.

Intergenerational knowledge perpetuation

The interviewees who knew how to fish revealed considerable insight into how fishing knowledge is passed on. Fishing along the shore for octopus and gleaning for clams were the most common practices that were mentioned, almost exclusively taught to interviewees by their grandmothers and other women in their family. There were very few, albeit notable, exceptions where the interviewee was taught by their father or uncle, and learned other styles of fishing such as shoreline rod fishing or forms of boat fishing. More so than the relationship between parents and their children, the relationship between grandmothers and their granddaughters served as the predominating nexus through which fishing knowledge and practices were passed on to the interviewees. In addition to emphasising the cultural importance of the relationship between grandmothers and granddaughters, these results highlight the gendered stratification of fishing practices and how fishing knowledge is passed down through generations.

Interviewees learned how to fish when they were young by watching older family members fish (learning through observation), or by fishing together (learning through direct practice). When time is available, the older generations share fishing knowledges and practices with younger generations, thus deepening the younger generations' relationships with the seas. This also reinforces social cohesion within families across multiple generations and ensures cultural perpetuation. However, because these teaching methods are so time-intensive, passing this knowledge from generation to generation is not always possible.

Several interviewees expressed regret for not learning how to fish, not teaching their children how to fish, or both. As one woman stated, "I am not going to lie, there are times where I regret not carrying on that skill my mom had. I could have passed [it] down to my children, especially my daughters because they love swimming at the wharf in front of our village." Similarly, a few interviewees noted a decrease in the number of people in younger generations who fished, as well as the generational decline of certain fishing practices. These declines were occasionally attributed to the changing interests of younger generations, but one prevailing theme was the lack of time and capacity needed to perpetuate fishing knowledges and engage in fishing itself. About a quarter of the interviewees mentioned working long hours and struggling to make ends meet, often leaving them with little time for fishing and teaching the younger generation how to fish. This has led to an overarching fear of the decline in interest for fishing as well as fishing as a cultural practice as the reliance on store-bought foods and imports increases in the islands. Maintaining these intergenerational relationships, particularly between grandmothers and granddaughters, plus prioritizing the time and resources necessary for teaching younger generations how to fish will be crucial for ensuring the perpetuation of fishing knowledges and practices.

Cultural subsistence and elder care

Mirroring the theme of the intergenerational transmission of fishing knowledges and practices was that of caring for older family members. According to over a quarter of the interviewees, a key role of their fishing was to feed older generations, either directly within their family or by sharing in their communities. Attached to this practice of providing fish as sustenance for elder people in the community was the understanding that local fish are tastier, healthier, and all around more preferable and suited for venerated elders than imported fish or other foods. Several interviewees even distinguished between fish caught within particular waters across the islands, having clear preferences and discernment over what best suits them and those they feed. This underscores traditionally caught and harvested fish as a form of "cultural subsistence," "a holistic approach to cultivating or harvesting subsistence resources (i.e. crops, fish, cattle) resulting in cross-cutting spiritual, physical, mental, educational, and environmental benefits" (Pascua et al. 2017:472). For those fishers and the elders they feed, fish is far more than just a source of protein – it is a connection to their families, to the seas, to their ancestors, and to their culture.

This theme is both a complement and a direct contrast to the decline in fishing practices noted by interviewees. If people fish less often, and fishing decreases among the younger generations, then it stands to reason that there might be a reduced supply of preferred, holistically nourishing fish for feeding older generations. Given the precarity and insecurity of aging generations, as well as the cultural impetus of caring for elders in American Samoa, these results highlight the critical nature of the perpetuation of fishing knowledges and practices for the sake of elder care. Ensuring a stable and abundant supply of locally caught fish for older generations is imperative for upholding cultural values and cultivating communal welfare across generations.

Hidden dimensions: Domestic labour and art

Most interviewees discussed practices surrounding cooking and distributing their catches or the catches of others. Interviewees were quick to share their favourite ways of preparing certain fish and marine fauna, as well as how they cook for their families and for the community, especially Sunday feasts. The frequency and enthusiasm with which interviewees discussed this highlights the significance of cooking and preparing of catches; for most marine taxa, it is the process through which we go from raw catch to cultural subsistence. The preparation of fish catches is an entire domain of fishery practices, requiring extensive knowledge and skill, as well as entailing hours of labour, often invisibilised and underplayed within socioecological systems. Such invisibilisation is facilitated and augmented by the gendered dynamics of cooking and related domestic labour. The interviews revealed that cooking for the families was predominantly done by women, regardless of whether or not the women themselves caught or gleaned the fish. Ensuring the perpetuation of fishing traditions and traditional seascape relationalities should entail paying attention to the aspects of domestic labour – in this case cooking – associated with fishing, as they are vital to the functioning of the system as a whole and the wellbeing of fishing communities.

Another oft-forgotten aspect of socioecological systems is how fisheries and the sea are pivotal to art and design, whether traditional, contemporary, or a blend of both. Several interviewees cited the seas as vital for providing inspiration for, or being a conduit of, their art and designs. The art may be expressed in crafting traditional wear, creating ocean-themed designs for community events, photographing the seas and the many flora and fauna found within the seas, or sharing songs, both new and old. The sea and fishing function as a focal point from which the art and design of these interviewees flowed. Some interviewees sourced materials directly from the ocean and shoreline for their works, particularly shells for the creation of *teuga fa'asamoa* (traditional jewelry and clothes). Such practices highlight the values of realms of fisheries beyond how we normally conceptualise it, beyond the acts of catching, sharing and selling for consumption.

Fa'afafine and expansive genders

In striving for a more expansive and inclusive understanding of gendered relationalities with fisheries and the seas, we interviewed several *fa'afafine* about their experiences with, and insights into, fisheries and the seas of American Samoa. Although fishing itself was a theme in this subset of interviews, other relational aspects emerged. *Fa'afafine* tended to talk more directly about their relationship with the ocean and how they relate their identity (both individual and communal) and sense of self to the seas. “*Fa'afafine* are one of the keepers of genealogy, and the tall tales of the voyages and spiritual realm unleashed... If you look closely at these designs on anyone's traditional tattoo, it is designs that link back to the ocean and land, the seagulls, the ocean animals and land animals all represented on the human skin... Everything is intertwined with nature and especially our ocean.” The seas

and fishing are integral to their understanding of who they are as *fa'afafine* and as American Samoans. Additionally, *fa'afafine* were more likely than others to discuss how their relationships with the ocean inform art and design, whether it is their own art or the art prevalent within their communities. These interviewees also noted that the seas, and their intimate relationship with the seas, were pivotal for the proliferation of certain cultural practices and community experiences, particularly in regards to traditional stories and oral histories.

Several of the *fa'afafine* interviewed also explained various forms of social exclusion they face. While their labour and output are readily relied on by community members, their full selves are not valued, and their opinions and desires are often not considered. Several *fa'afafine* even expressed their appreciation to the interviewer for taking the time to seek them out since their thoughts and voices are rarely valued or sought after for consideration. These results highlight the importance of being intentionally expansive in our engagements with fisheries and seascape relationalities. By conventionally interviewing only those within the common, narrower conceptions of who qualifies as a fisher, we perhaps unwittingly exclude important members of communities whose experiences and insights are invaluable and vital for ensuring that management actions uphold the welfare of the entire community. This not only truncates the breadth and depth of our research and resulting management actions, but also perpetuates the exclusion of marginalised communities, whether marginalised along the lines of gender or other facets of identity or position within society. More expansive engagements with gender and a broader consideration of who is vested in fisheries, and has valuable insights into fisheries and their overarching socioecological systems, will foster more profound research and more equitable management.

Conclusion

Our interviews with women and *fa'afafine* in American Samoa revealed rich insights about fishing practices and broader relationalities with the seas in the region, many of which likely would have been missed had we not taken a gender-intentional approach. Overall, the findings highlight: 1) the importance of intergenerational relationships for the perpetuation of fishing knowledges and practices; 2) the pivotal role of cultural subsistence by way of fishing for the care of elders; 3) the prominence of cultural practices that overlap and are interconnected with fisheries that would normally be excluded from fisheries considerations, particularly domestic labour as well as art and design; and 4) the need for expansive engagements with gender as a construct and lived experience in regard to fisheries and seascape relationalities, particularly through the explicit inclusion of people of genders outside of the dominant, colonial binary. Even further, the results of this study illustrate how fisheries and the seas function as a nucleus through which people situate themselves and their identities as well as their communities and cultures, obtain sustenance both materially and emotionally, and facilitate their broader tapestry of relations and cultural practices. Fisheries manifest and implicate far beyond the bounds of the practice of fishing itself, and fisheries research and

management should recognise and consider this fuller scope of seascape relationalities in order to ensure efficacy and equity in our work. Such recognition includes:

- preserving and facilitating intergenerational knowledge transference opportunities, in terms of both time and capital;
- prioritising the accessibility of cultural subsistence in conjunction with meeting conservation and fisheries management goals;
- broadening internal conceptions of who counts as “fishers” to account for those who glean and harvest from, or otherwise relate with, the ocean beyond the act of fishing for consumption;
- updating methods for gathering demographics data to account for people whose genders exist outside of the binary; and
- explicitly seeking out women, trans people, and others of diverse genders for interviews and collaboration when surveying and engaging with communities.

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