

# Coastal community perspectives on key issues concerning gender equality and social inclusion in Western Province, Solomon Islands

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## Background

The development of a new gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) strategy to guide the Solomon Islands Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources (MFMR) has been in the works for a while. The purpose of the strategy is to address inequalities and to ensure gender and inclusion are mainstreamed and applied as a way to achieve equitable benefits for everyone. The importance of expanding the consultation process to the community level was identified as crucial step, given the strong emphasis of community-based fisheries management activities and an increased focus on livelihoods support. The development of the new GESI strategy follows a review process of the MFMR Strategy for Mainstreaming Gender in Fisheries 2011–2013. The review process is currently being conducted by a Technical Working Group (TWG), with members from various MFMR divisions, and headed by the Deputy Director for Policy and Planning, and supported by the Pacific Community, WorldFish, and the Ministry for Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs. The TWG identified two provinces for community consultations: Western and Makira-Ulawa.

## Western Province consultations

Community consultations in Western Province took place from 5 to 7 October 2022. Four selected members from the TWG, including the provincial officer based in the province's capital (Gizo) formed the facilitation team supported by two staff members from the Pacific Community. Two community consultations in Western Province took place, one in Munda and the other in Noro. The Wildlife Conservation Society office, based in Western Province, provided crucial support in the identification and selection of diverse community representatives, mainly from Munda-based communities and a few from nearby islands. MFMR's Noro-based office assisted with the selection and invitation of community representatives from eight different island communities from and around Noro, which allowed a wide geographical representation. Advisory support for the development of a facilitation guide for the consultation process was provided by WorldFish gender experts.

## Munda consultations

Munda participants included a diverse group of women and men fishers, youth fishers, market sellers, and those active in conservation, management and/or compliance (e.g. some were community rangers or part of coastal resource management committees). In total, 27 community representatives attended the consultations: 12 women, 15 men, of whom 6 were youth fishers (i.e. aged < 35 years).

MFMR began the consultations by explaining the idea for a new GESI strategy to support inclusive and equitable services and benefits for coastal communities. MFMR described the need for gender mainstreaming as a to better tailor services for women and men, depending on their different roles and needs. The importance of capturing community voices and views to inform the new strategy was highlighted. MFMR's expectations from the consultations were outlined, namely that community members would gain an increased understanding of GESI issues that concern people's fishing roles and activities, including subsistence fishing and fishing for income, including post-harvesting and marketing. The objective of the consultations was to learn from and understand community needs, and the dynamics of gender and social inclusion. MFMR provided a brief outline of the outdated strategy from 2011 to 2013, and concluded that the new strategy will have a stronger community focus by reflecting key GESI issues that the communities themselves identify. MFMR also explained that the consultations would not only focus on identifying challenges and barriers, but also discuss opportunities and future social change strategies needed for more prosperous fishing.

During consultations, SPC provided definitions of gender, sex, equality, the difference between equality and equity, social inclusion and exclusion, and social factors that determine people's exclusion or inclusion. In addition, the relevance of GESI in fisheries was discussed by presenting facts, figures and examples. In brief, the bigger picture on where GESI principles sit within the national frameworks was outlined, referring also to the Western Province Women's Empowerment and Transformation Policy for Development (2018–2022). The purpose of SPC's session was to ensure that participants were familiar with the basic definitions and ideas in order to eliminate misunderstandings, misconceptions and bias, and to set the scene for the group work that would follow the consultations. Unfortunately, staff from the Ministry for Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs (MWYCA) were unable to join the consultations as initially planned, although they did provide feedback and advice that helped design the content and set the tone for this session. Efforts were made to tailor the session to the community groups working with MWYCA and MFMR in order to understand GESI within the context of fishing communities.

The core part of the consultations was conducted through group work activities facilitated by MFMR staff. For these purposes, a facilitation guide was developed with support from WorldFish gender experts and MFMR. The group work activities included the identification of benefits and challenges for specific community members, such as women who were market sellers or youth fishers. This group work

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helped community representatives identify various benefits for different groups while also assessing GESI barriers for themselves. In a second group session, participants were asked to take a look into the future and discuss solution-based ideas that could improve the identified challenges and their GESI dimensions. The interactive nature of these activities allowed for good engagement and were an opportunity for discussions between participants. In some instances, the group work needed a stronger focus on key topics and a better focus on the GESI dimensions, to avoid answers that were generic or too broad. It was agreed to tweak the group work exercise by adding in specific work topics around livelihood, management, decision-making and food security.

## GESI perspectives identified

### Challenges and issues

The focus of men was clearly on harvesting-related issues although they also noted that they experience fewer challenges than women and youth fishers. Due to their focus on harvesting, the key challenges identified by men were the depletion of fish stocks and environmental threats impacting on their harvests. Women mentioned more challenges in total, and identified a more diverse range of challenges that were socioeconomic and environmental in nature in both harvesting and post-harvesting activities. Men's needs were mainly being trained in new fishing techniques, and having access to improved cold storage capabilities (especially when they go to sea for long periods). Both women and men, including youth fishers, feel an increasing pressure to harvest fish and other seafood order to maintain food security for the community due to growing populations. They also noted that climate change has affected their fishing.

Women feel they have to fish more often than they did in the past (gleaning and inshore fishing), especially when the weather is bad and men are unable to fish beyond the reefs.

At the same time, women lack the support of their husbands to undertake fishing activities because men expect women to attend to household and childcare duties. The lack of spousal trust, jealousy and controlling behaviour from husbands were also mentioned as restricting women from undertaking fishing activities and limiting their ability to expand and venture into new, different and/or extended fishing activities.

In this context, women mentioned the lack of recognition and respect by men for their profession as women fishers, and the blame placed on them by men if they do not catch enough fish. Women also highlighted their dependence on men to repair their canoes, often facing challenges to convince men to do so because men often do not recognise women's fishing activities as being important or valuable enough. Canoe maintenance, therefore, becomes a greater burden on women who also rely on the canoes for transportation to markets. Women pre-dominantly mentioned challenges around post-harvesting and marketing, and cold storage issues were mentioned by both women and men. Women stressed that cold storage is important for marketing to ensure freshness, hygiene and quality of their catch.

Women's traditional environmental knowledge came out during discussions on specific bait fish they use for their fishing activities. Environmental changes have already shown negative impacts on certain bait fish, but women discussed the different types of bait they can use, depending on changing weather patterns. This shows women's constant adaptation and building resilience to climate change impacts, and demonstrates gendered environmental knowledge. The use of destructive fishing methods was also discussed as a challenge from a GESI angle, namely the identification of certain groups of people who use these methods, such as poisonous leaves, vine fishing, gill nets or poaching. Further consultations are needed to find out why and women and youth use some of these methods, which may be because of limited access to information, training and awareness.



Participants in Noro. ©Tupe Samani

Youth fishers fish for more diverse reasons such as food, income, physical exercise, friendship and bonding, or to contribute to communal events. The perceived lack of interest by youth (raised by community representatives) in management and conservation may be a result of their lack of agency in the community set-up and would require stronger efforts to enable meaningful participation and improved intergenerational dialogue in the communities.

Young fishers mentioned numerous challenges such as:

- the lack of boat access and control, which makes them highly dependent on family permission, and they tend to be given the least priority;
- limited funds available for fishing gear and fuel, and most youth do not have any income source at all;
- limited decision-making powers on fishing-related activities within the village hierarchy of male elders, and running the risk of getting punished or disciplined harshly if they do not follow an elder's advice;
- being excluded from processes such as setting up fisheries management measures (e.g. community-based fisheries management), which can impact their fishing activities such as by losing their well-known fishing spots and having to fish somewhere farther away, thus having to pay more for fuel prices; and
- overharvesting.

#### Opportunities and solutions

Community representatives in Munda identified a range of solutions and opportunities to address and foster GESI in their fishing communities. It is worth mentioning here that youth fishers expressed the most positive and innovative thinking when identifying solutions and opportunities,

including diversifying livelihood options; mitigating weather-related impacts through weather apps or education and awareness programmes that target them as resource users; and becoming active players and agents of change in discussions of sustainable management that often exclude them. Other opportunities and solutions that were mentioned include the following:

- A stronger involvement of women and youth in management activities is needed, including in monitoring and decision-making, coupled with increased community awareness campaigns on the importance of marine resources and management, including conservation in order to foster community support for CBFM and suitable management tools (e.g. size limits).
- Awareness campaigns should strongly discourage destructive methods, and should target all fishing groups, including women and youth, because the use of such methods is linked to GESI roles. Awareness also needs to highlight the diverse benefits from sustainable marine resource management linked to livelihoods, employment and income, tourist activities and more.
- Education and awareness campaigns should target youth on issues such as conservation and the consequences of littering and polluting. This could be done through ocean literacy programmes and reviewing school curricula.
- Youth-focused fisheries projects would help to foster interest in fishing as a career.
- An improved image of fishing as a career for youth fishers may also empower them to speak up and engage in decision making and in CBFM.
- An increased understanding of GESI roles in fishing (who does what and where, or who holds what specific



Participants in Munda. ©Tupe Samani

“gendered” traditional knowledge), including further investigation on age and other social categories, especially investigating migrant fishers’ situations will inform policy and projects on CBFM or livelihoods support, for example.

- Access to ice machines and coolers for both fisherwomen and fishermen is needed for marketing purposes and for fishing trips to keep the fish cool and allow fishers to stay out longer on trips.
- To address harmful masculine behaviour (jealousy, control, blame and lack of support), women fishers suggested awareness training for men on gender equality, with a focus on time burdens, need for shared responsibilities for household and childcare duties, support for women fishers, and recognition of their contributions to food security, livelihoods and family and community well-being.

### Noro consultations

The same selection criteria and agenda as described for Munda were applied and followed for Noro community consultations. In total, 22 participants attended; 16 were men, 6 were women, and of these 6 were youth (< 35 years). The Noro group was less diverse than the Munda group, and men dominated the consultations, which included participants from a wider geographic scale, coming from eight different island communities (some very remote islands). The Noro group had four additional non-community representatives: two MFMR fisheries officers (one male and one female) based in Noro, and two female industry representatives, one from SolTuna (tuna processing plant) and one from NFD (fishing company).

#### Challenges and issues

Fishing in Noro is done by both women and men to contribute to household consumption and communal gatherings such as birthdays or wedding occasions or other community events that require feeding big numbers of people. Youth fishers, especially, are called upon to provide quantities of fish for community activities, although they often feel that their “free labour” is expected of them without being valued for their contributions to communal benefits. A stronger need for subsistence fishing was identified by women and men in Noro compared to Munda, which could possibly be linked to the fact that participants came from more remote island communities and must travel greater distances to reach the main markets. Compared to men, women fishers raised more and greater challenges all together and across a wider range of areas mirroring the findings from Munda. Key challenges raised by women fishers were 1) their reliance on men to take them fishing in the face of limited access to and control over boats, and 2) the lack of proper fishing gear, and challenges to accessing (better) gear, as well as a lack of training opportunities to learn about different gear types, fishing styles and techniques to diversify fishing for better and more efficient outcomes. Both, women and men expressed a need to learn more about diversifying their bait and to learn more about hook sizes for more effective fishing results. Increasingly more severe weather events place greater pressure on women to provide food through

their fishing activities because the species and spaces (crabs, shellfish, mangrove fruit) where they fish are more protected and less impacted by bad weather. However, mid- and long-term impacts from climate change on natural habitats are likely to further exacerbate this growing pressure on women to provide food.

The need for cold storage facilities, improved market infrastructure, and additional market centres were mentioned by men and women market sellers. However, there were less vigorous discussions on gendered issues related to marketing due to the small number of women who participated in Noro compared to Munda. Young market sellers need to be promoted because marketing is often not seen by youth as a lucrative way of earning a livelihood or as a first step to gain business experience for learning, which they need in order to further develop business ideas and enhance business skills. Youth fishers and sellers felt that their entrepreneurial skills were not acknowledged or invested in, while they show more resilient adaptation strategies to cope with fluctuating market prizes through the diversification of business options. Both women and men market sellers highlighted the importance of market spaces to exchange goods when products do not sell, emphasising the importance of market centres beyond just selling goods.

During discussions on marginalised groups, community representatives identified the following risk groups as facing additional hardship in their fishing communities (listed by priority):

- female-headed households, in particular those headed by widows;
- persons with disabilities and those with limited access to health services;
- people who lack ownership rights, in particular land ownership; and
- people from different ethnic backgrounds, especially migrants and those from minority groups.

Challenges associated with being marginalised were:

- being treated as an outcast and thus rejected by the community;
- being seen as a hindrance and burden in the community;
- lack of opportunities;
- insecurities; and
- an increase in dispute potential.

In this context of social exclusion, the disruption of family structures was mentioned as a challenge impacting on fishing activities. Noro is the country’s hub for commercial fishing and fish processing, which attracts locals from all the different provinces as well as foreign workers. They often leave their families behind to seek employment in Noro, and this has caused disruptions in social structures such as a greater number of family break-ups and increased single parent households, especially female-headed households. Locals from different provinces have their own traditions and cultural practices, and these can clash in a small place like Noro. Those looked down on as minority groups are more likely to suffer from exclusion. At the same time, fishing was

highlighted as a security asset for marginalised groups by creating employment opportunities in an otherwise scarce labour market.

Industry representatives during the consultations highlighted the challenges they face with regard to GESI, including biased recruitment processes, particularly for casual work opportunities. Initiatives have been taken by the industry to provide employment for persons with disabilities, tackle sexual harassment, provide financial literacy training, address childcare needs, and diversify career opportunities for women and girls in typically male-dominated areas. The importance of investing in a GESI-friendly work environment with a zero-tolerance policy for gender-based violence is taken seriously through the Waka Mere programme to advance workplace gender equality.

### Opportunities and solutions

The importance of market centres was highlighted by men, women and youth for various reasons. Investing in upgrading or adding more markets or fisheries centres (e.g. a fisheries centre in Vonavona Lagoon was suggested), supporting better access to cold storage facilities, and promoting fish marketing as a career pathway for young sellers were all seen as opportunities that would benefit all community members, especially for people from islands farther away. To tackle social exclusion and support marginalised groups, a set of targeted initiatives were suggested, including awareness raising, capacity building, financial support schemes, and inclusive policies with the potential to influence rigid governance structures for inclusive decision-making. Stronger involvement on the part of MFMR and civil society organisations in providing training opportunities and other means of empowerment and/or capacity building initiatives (especially those targeting women and marginalised groups), would further build on past and existing efforts and lessons learned, as suggested by industry personnel during the consultations.

### Conclusion and common themes

Gendered issues in the fishing communities consulted are diverse, concerning environmental, socioeconomic, governance and cultural aspects to harvesting, postharvesting, and marketing activities, with women and youth facing more challenges than men. Women's limited access to and control over boats; the lack of spousal support for household and

childcare while also confronting emotional stress due to men's controlling behaviour and jealousy when spending time out fishing; the growing pressure on food security felt more by women; and their unheard voices in decision-making concerning resource access, use and management due to culturally influenced governance structures, continue to impact women and their ability to undertake fishing activities. Youth fishers and sellers face similar challenges, if not more, with regard to access to and control over boats, and participating in decision-making, due to their low social status in a hierarchy of male elders. In the consultations, youth raised strong concerns about the lack of recognition of their fishing activities for communal benefits, and the lack of investment in their entrepreneurial skills and talents, even though they showed more innovation, flexibility and adaptation than their elders when they discussed benefits and opportunities from a youth fisher's perspective. Projects that target youth fishers and youth sellers, and support their economic empowerment, are seen as an opportunity to address these challenges and to boost their self-esteem as valued members in their fishing communities.

A common concern raised by men and women fishers and market sellers was the lack of cold storage facilities such as ice machines, solar freezers and coolers. Investing in cold storage infrastructure for fishers and market sellers will benefit a wide range of people, but needs to be further investigated to design a sustainable and equitable solution. Involvement of MFMR and civil society organisations to support the industry's efforts in tackling GESI inequalities, not only at the workplace but with wider community outreach objective, can help address some GESI concerns. Successful training initiatives by the industry were, for example, fish handling, financial literacy and saving techniques that benefited women, in particular, with knowledge and skills trickling down to the community level. Women fishers also highlighted their training on new fishing styles and techniques, diversifying the bait they use, and knowing what hook to use. These types of training that target women specifically are important because training workshops typically target men because they are seen as the main fishers. However, many women's interest in accessing these training opportunities will help them adapt better to the changing environment and other climate change-related impacts on their marine habitats, including increased resilience to cope with increasing food security demands.