

# Fiji National Women in Fisheries Forum – 2023

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The Fiji National Women in Fisheries Forum – 2023 was held in March 2023 to foster and build on a previous dialogue that began at the first forum held in 2018 (Mangubhai et al. 2018). The forum, hosted by the Women in Fisheries Network in Fiji, provides a platform for women who are engaged in fisheries (including fishers and fish workers) to learn and share their knowledge and experiences, as well as raise their concerns and needs to policy-makers and development partners. The forum also provides an opportunity for fisheries practitioners and researchers to listen and learn from women fishers and fish workers themselves. The forum increases awareness and knowledge of gender issues in the fisheries so that gender equality in the sector can progress.

Women work across the whole spectrum of fisheries activities including harvesting, post-harvesting, marketing, and value-adding with little support, poor working conditions, and without a policy that focuses on their needs. They are also not a recognized player in the economy for all the work that they do, including unpaid care work. Despite these challenges, the 2018 forum brought to light the success stories of women fishers and their inspirational stories of how they resisted challenges, overcame poverty, and built their own businesses (e.g. pearl, fish, mud crab farming).

The 2023 forum was opened by the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Fisheries, Atelaithe Rokosuka. In her opening remarks she reiterated the highlights from the 2018 forum, and recognised the enormous contributions made by Fijian women fishers, post-harvesters, and market vendors to food, livelihoods, and wellbeing. These issues were raised by a variety of stakeholder groups. Despite these difficulties, the 2018 forum highlighted inspirational tales of women fishers who overcame hardships, emerged from poverty, or established successful businesses.

Permanent Secretary Rokosuka stated that “forums like this can provide a platform for exchange and learning, enabling the voices of women in the industry to be heard as advocates for change”.

She alluded to the forum as a crucial step towards recognising and empowering women in the fisheries sector, and an opportunity to work together towards promoting gender

equality. In addition, Mrs Rokosuka mentioned that the forum will serve as a platform to showcase successful initiatives and projects that have been implemented to support women in the fisheries sector and to identify areas where further support is needed. This, she said, would enable participants to learn from each other’s experiences and build partnerships for future collaborations. She went on to say that through these efforts, a more inclusive and equitable fisheries sector can be created that recognises and values the important role of women in sustainable fisheries management. She followed up by mentioning that ultimately, women and their communities would have improved livelihoods, as well as better conservation outcomes for our oceans and marine resources.

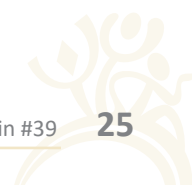
The Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation-led Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development Initiative confirmed that women account for 51% of all inshore fishers and 94% of freshwater fishers, while 43% of Fijian women who fish do so for a source of income and 99% to provide food for their household (Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation 2022). Communal contributions from their fishing activities are also high, with 64% of women providing food for cultural events. These contributions remain invisible because they are not included in official statistics<sup>3</sup> (e.g. gross domestic product does not consider non-monetary outputs). Women have a higher domestic workload than men, and this is still seen as the key barrier for women from engaging further in the fisheries sector. Other challenges such as lack of accessing fishing gear, financial resources, technology and other assets, limited involvement in community-based resource management, and decision-making were confirmed as key persistent barriers for women fishers.

The objectives of the forum were to provide an environment for sharing lessons (positive and negative), research findings, impact stories, or other learning opportunities to shed light on gender issues in Fiji’s fisheries sector. In addition, through the forum, the concerns and needs of women fishers post-COVID-19 were identified, and networking spaces were provided for participants to establish new working relations or identify opportunities for joint action and partnerships.

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<sup>3</sup> The Ministry of Women-led Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development Initiative, 2022



## Forum topics

Speakers included fisherwomen and representatives of civil society and government who were invited to speak on one of four main themes:

- 1 **Joining men at the blue economy table – Let's boost equity for a sustainable future**
- 2 **Valuing fisherwomen's indigenous knowledge and resource management practices for community and national well-being**
- 3 **Challenging governance structures – Let's hear it from the women fishers and fish workers**
- 4 **Pandemics, disasters, and shocks – Women leading the way with resilience and innovation**

## Key messages

Key messages were distilled from the presentations and sharing of lessons under these themes, and are summarised below.

- 1 **Availability of gender-disaggregated data to inform policy and service delivery:** A lack of disaggregated data in formalised national statistics systems was highlighted.
- 2 **Navigating through shocks, pandemics, and disasters:** Fijian women play a critical role as resilient safety nets for their families, communities and the nation.
- 3 **Women fishers and fish workers have long been part of the blue economy:** Their expanded roles in fisheries stretch across a wide spectrum of pre-to post-harvesting, selling and value-adding while bargaining, transporting, and marketing their produce.

- 4 **Traditional knowledge:** Many examples of women's explicit traditional knowledge were shared in the forum.
- 5 **Access to opportunities:** It can be easier for people living in urban and semi-urban areas to access to development interventions than those in more remote rural areas.
- 6 **A lack of access to information:** This was raised by women fishers and fish workers as a major stumbling block.

The key messages culminated in the drafting of the Women in Fisheries Call to Action (see article on page xx in this edition of the bulletin).

## References

- Mangubhai S., Tabunakawai-Vakalalabure M., Fox M., Leweniqila L., Meo I., Naleba M., Thomas A. 2018. Fiji's Northern Division hosts its first Women in Fisheries Forum. SPC Women in Fisheries Information Bulletin 28:17–18. <https://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/9kj6n>
- Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation. 2022. Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development Initiative. Suva, Fiji: Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation.