

The Marshall Island Marine Resource Authority (MIMRA) reaps the benefits of its equal employment opportunity practices

MIMRA is responsible for coastal and oceanic fisheries management in the Marshall Islands. It employs 85 staff members, 19 (22 per cent) of which are women. Women head both the Coastal and Community Affairs Division (Florence Edwards) and the Oceanic Fisheries Division (Berry Muller) and are therefore 40 per cent of the MIMRA executive team of five members.

Women predominate in the Coastal and Community Affairs Division. They undertake the full range of jobs. Lyla Lemari is a coastal fisheries research officer and enjoys diving as part of her work in monitoring coastal fish populations. The division also undertakes socio-economic surveys, and includes handcraft makers as they use marine resources. Florence Edwards noted that, in communities, women do not always recognise their own contribution. In their household surveys, women often refer to the man to answer the questions. Men do not always recognise the contribution of their wives. As an example, one husband who was interviewed said that he earned most of the household income through his fishing activities. The team then interviewed the wife who was earning more money than her husband from her handcraft activities.

The Oceanic Division first employed a woman as a licencing officer in the early 2000s. The first female MIMRA observer was employed in 2011 and now four of the 68 observers that are employed are women. Since June 2015, eight female observers achieved PIRFO¹ certification in the Pacific Islands region; one in the Marshall Islands, three in Kiribati, three in the Solomon Islands and one in Vanuatu. There are now over 750 observers in the region, where women probably only make up about two per cent of these positions.

Working on fishing vessels and with observers is not always easy for women; however, Eunice Borero, the MIMRA Electronic Reporting Officer, is tasked with the implementation of new Electronic Reporting (ER) tools used for collecting fisheries data on tuna fishing vessels. This includes observers using handheld tablets to file their daily reports, which are transmitted to MIMRA via satellite. This new system not only gets information to MIMRA on a timely basis, but it also helps with data accuracy through automated calculations and validation processes. The tablets have an SOS feature that can be used by observers when their safety is threatened.

Fishing vessels are now also using tablet applications to submit their catch log-sheets to MIMRA. In Papua New Guinea, the National Fisheries Authority provided the impetus for the implementation of electronic reporting tools (for both observers and vessels). Fisheries data

collection systems are thereby evolving in the region. Nine Pacific Island countries and territories are currently at various stages of implementing new electronic reporting tools for observers and vessels, from design to full implementation.

Eunice provides training and coordination for fisheries observers and fishing vessel captains using these new tools. She also manages staff and is getting involved in the trials of Electronic Monitoring Systems (EMSs). EMSs are video camera and GPS systems placed on-board fishing vessels for collecting information on their activities. This information is later analysed by office observers when the vessels return to port.

Over the last two years, Eunice has attended and delivered key regional training and workshop sessions held in New Caledonia, the Federated States of Micronesia, Australia, Fiji and in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI). She has built strong industry contacts and possesses a good understanding of national and regional fisheries data collection standards and how ER and EMSs can be tools for meeting these standards.

She is Filipino, and moved to RMI at the age of 19, as her mother lives in Majuro. She had finished two years of IT studies at a postgraduate level and worked in other RMI Government agencies as an administrator and trainer before starting at MIMRA. When her current position was advertised, she thought it was a 'boy's' job and that she would never get hired – but MIMRA offered it to her as she was the best suited candidate.

At the start, she found the job hard. Most people working in fisheries management have come up through this sector as observers, debriefers and trainers. Due to their regulatory responsibilities, engaging with vessel captains can be difficult for all fisheries staff. Eunice has sometimes faced prejudice or downright dismissal when on board some vessels. For example, once a captain asked her 'if she had even been to school'.

She has also experienced some observers being averse to the idea of receiving training from a younger person and a woman. So in her training sessions, Eunice begins

¹ PIRFO: The Pacific Islands Regional Fisheries Observer programme has provided training and certification to almost 600 observers since 2007.



Eunice Borero (front right) training fisheries observers at MIMRA in Majuro on the use of a tablet-based application for collecting data (image: Malo Hosken).

by emphasising the importance of professionalism and cooperation. Eunice learns from observers about the fishing operations, as much as observers learn from her about ER and EMS developments. The common objective is for MIMRA to implement these new tools, which are not 'plug in and play' ready.

Eunice commented on the importance of the support she has had from both the Pacific Community (SPC) and MIMRA. MIMRA is a proud 'equal employment opportunities employer' and has a policy manual with guidelines to make sure they get the best qualified person for every job.

For the observers employed by MIMRA, a key supportive factor is that the observer coordinator, Bernard Fiubala, takes a lot of care when selecting the vessels on which women are placed on. Women fisheries observers always have a cabin to themselves and are only placed on ships where there is an understanding captain. Bernard's own background as an observer allows him to effectively place observers on fishing vessels.

Employment opportunities in fisheries are growing; there are a lot of women working across various fisheries sectors in the region – e.g. at a recent regional meeting on Fisheries Trade Policy there were nine men and 13 women. At the tuna processing plant in Majuro, there are more women than men – employment varies depending on season – up to 300. EMSs could also present opportunities for women working as office observers.

MIMRA is increasing the number of fisheries observers to 100; thereby, encouraging and supporting women as well as men to work in MIMRA is essential.

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