

Women's participation promotes effective and equitable fisheries management but is hindered by restrictive gender roles in Fiji

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Conservationists and fisheries managers have historically focused somewhat narrowly on achieving environmental goals, at the expense of environmental justice. But justice in environmental governance is instrumental to achieving social and ecological goals, and is a moral imperative. In recent years, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of justice in fisheries management and marine conservation. Procedural justice, which concerns how decisions are made and by whom, remains an under-examined dimension of justice in environmental governance broadly and in particular, fisheries management.

Introduction

When examining procedural justice in fisheries management, it is critical to consider that fishers are not a homogeneous group but differ according to their individual gender, age, migrant status, marital status, race, ethnicity, and other, intersecting identities. Gender, in particular, has received increasing attention in fisheries management circles in recent years, as scientists and managers recognise the important but often marginalised roles women play in the fisheries sector. Much of the early and ongoing work on this topic has been published in this bulletin. A recent review found that 80% of published studies on women's participation in small-scale fisheries management showed low or no participation, and that their exclusion resulted in negative outcomes (Chambon et al. 2023).

In this study, we examine procedural justice in coastal fisheries management in Fiji through an intersectional lens. We ask: what are the benefits of and barriers to iTaukei women's and men's participation in fisheries management, and how do these vary according to their intersecting identities (e.g., age, migrant status, marital status)? We surveyed 655 key informants in 146 villages and conducted *talanoa* sessions and 54 semi-structured interviews in four of those villages, which have been anonymised to protect respondents' confidentiality.

Background: Women's roles in Fiji's fisheries

In Fiji, women's fishing is critical to food security in rural villages: the fresh fish caught by women is the main source of protein for most of their households (Thomas et al. 2021).

Their fishing and post-harvest processing and marketing activities also contribute significantly to household income (Thomas et al. 2021). Women's roles in fisheries in Fiji differ according to their intersecting identities. For example, while iTaukei (Indigenous Fijian) women are predominantly involved in harvesting and marketing of inshore species, such as mud crabs (Mangubhai et al. 2021), Indo-Fijian women are usually traders involved in buying the mud crabs and reselling them (Reddy 2020). Yet women's diverse roles are often undervalued, overlooked, and poorly understood (Thomas et al. 2021). Most fishing activities done by women are for subsistence, and thus fall into the "unpaid work" category and are not counted alongside the fishing activities done by men for commercial purposes in official statistics (Vunisea 2016). Yet women spend more time than men on work overall, work fewer paid hours, and in general have less discretionary time than men (Narsey 2007; Vunisea 2016).

Despite their important roles alongside men in the fisheries sector, recent research has shown that women's participation in management is guided and, in some cases, limited by societal expectations of women, for example the expectation that women will take care of the home and children (Barclay et al. 2022). But excluding women from decision-making excludes valuable ecological knowledge; since women tend to participate in the sector differently than men, they have different and, in some cases, wider and deeper knowledge than men to contribute to effective fisheries management and recovery (Kitolelei and Kakuma 2022; Thomas et al. 2021; Vunisea 2016). The roles and responsibilities of women in Fiji are shifting (Thomas et al. 2021); still, restrictive gender norms hinder progress toward equality in fisheries management (Mangubhai and Lawless 2021).

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Key research findings

Survey findings

Women’s participation in coastal fisheries management is low. Of the five groups surveyed, key informants representing women (n=145) were the most likely (70%) to report “no meetings” or “no participation” and the least likely (3%) to report “full participation” in fisheries management in their village (Figure 1).

More participation by women is associated with greater perceptions of the benefits of fisheries management. Although most women (80%) perceive benefits, the proportion declines with decreasing participation (Figure 2a). Following a similar trend as participation, as perception of fairness decreased, so did perception of benefits (Figure 2b). More participation by women is also associated with more support for fisheries management (Figure 3a), and women who perceive more benefits from fisheries management are more supportive of it (Figure 3b).

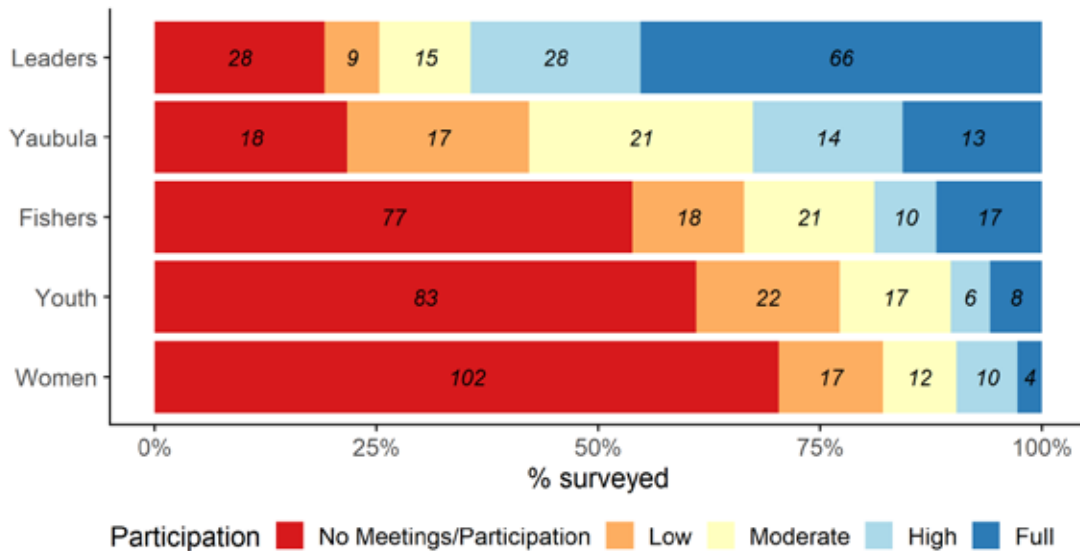


Figure 1: Level of participation by group according to key informants.

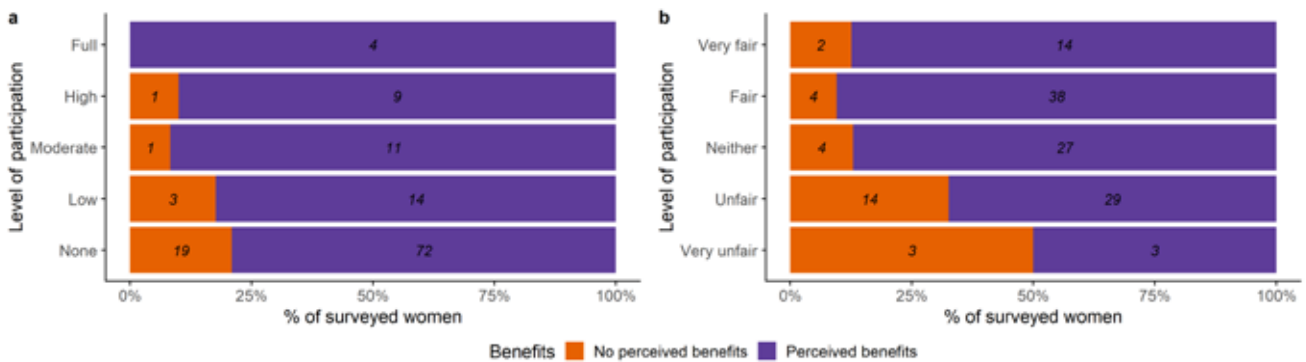


Figure 2: (a) Women’s perception of benefits by level of participation according to key informants (n=137); (b) women’s perception of benefits by perception of fairness according to key informants (n=137).

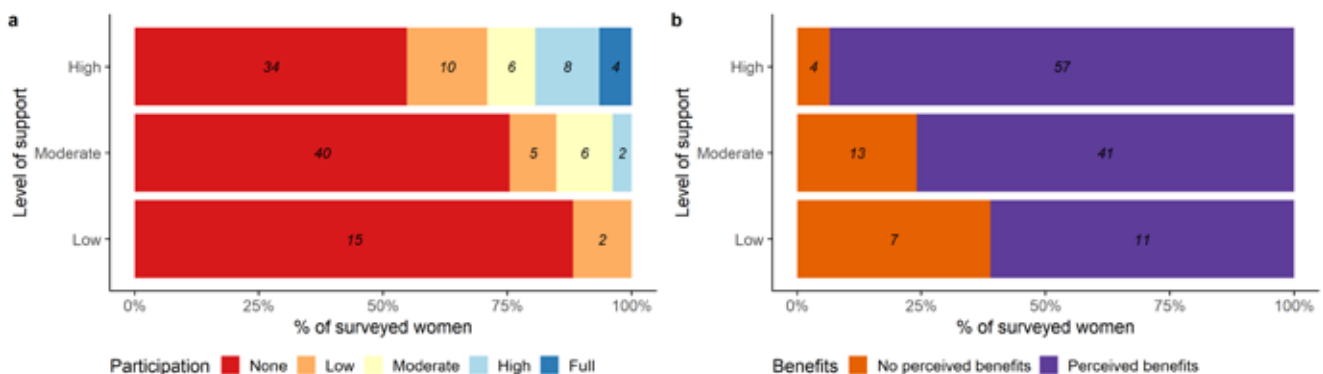


Figure 3: (a) Women’s support for fisheries management by level of participation according to key informants (n=137); (b) women’s support for fisheries management by perception of benefits according to key informants (n=137).

Interview findings

Perceived benefits of participating in fisheries management

Thirteen respondents noted increased abundance of fish and other marine life as a result of their participation in fisheries management. Other ecological benefits mentioned by respondents included improved coral reef habitat, the reappearance of rare species, increased size of target species, the presence of more fish close to shore, and the indirect benefit of improved freshwater management in the village.

The most common social benefit was enhanced awareness and knowledge of fisheries management in the village. A young man from Village 3 echoed many respondents when he said, “I get to know about what’s going on in the community, what is *tabu* and what is not.” An older man in Village 4 highlighted the content shared at these meetings, noting, “I get to know some Western ideas that blend well with what we believe as traditional fishers.” Respondents also noted personal and spiritual development benefits to participating in fisheries management, for example a middle-aged woman and leader of the women’s group from Village 1 said, “I am very shy, so to be able to speak in public was always a challenge. So, having this role [as the women’s leader] has forced me to face my problem and be able to speak in public and address my audience. That is something that has become a benefit of me being part of these meetings.” Relational benefits were also noted by respondents. For example, an older woman living in Village 2 commented, “I love to go to be part of the discussions with the other women. We talk about so many other things that are helpful... It has brought the women together closer.” Others noted the relational benefit of intergenerational meeting. A middle-aged man from Village 3 noted, “Another benefit of these *tabu* is the positive change in attitude for our young ones who have learnt to abide by the rules of the *tabu*.”

Women’s participation is perceived as important

When asked, “Do you think it is important for women in the village to participate in fisheries decision-making?” all but one respondent (a middle-aged man from Village 4) agreed that women’s participation is important. Both women and men referred to women’s role as the “backbone of any village community” (elder man from Village 4), as well as fairness. For example, a young woman from Village 4 said, “The women are the ones doing everything for and in the village. Women run the village basically. So, it’s only fair that their voices be heard in decisions as such.” A middle-aged man from Village 3 connected fairness with women’s knowledge of fisheries, “Everything that happens is because women make it happen. So, it is only right that women also be part of the decision-making, as they are the ones that know our fisheries better than men.” A middle-aged woman from Village 1 said plainly, “Since we are also humans, I ask that we be included in fisheries decision-making.”

Both women and men expressed that women as a group, are more knowledgeable than men about the ocean because they are the ones doing the majority of the harvesting in the village to feed their families. A young woman in Village 2 argued, “It is the women that do everything in the households, from

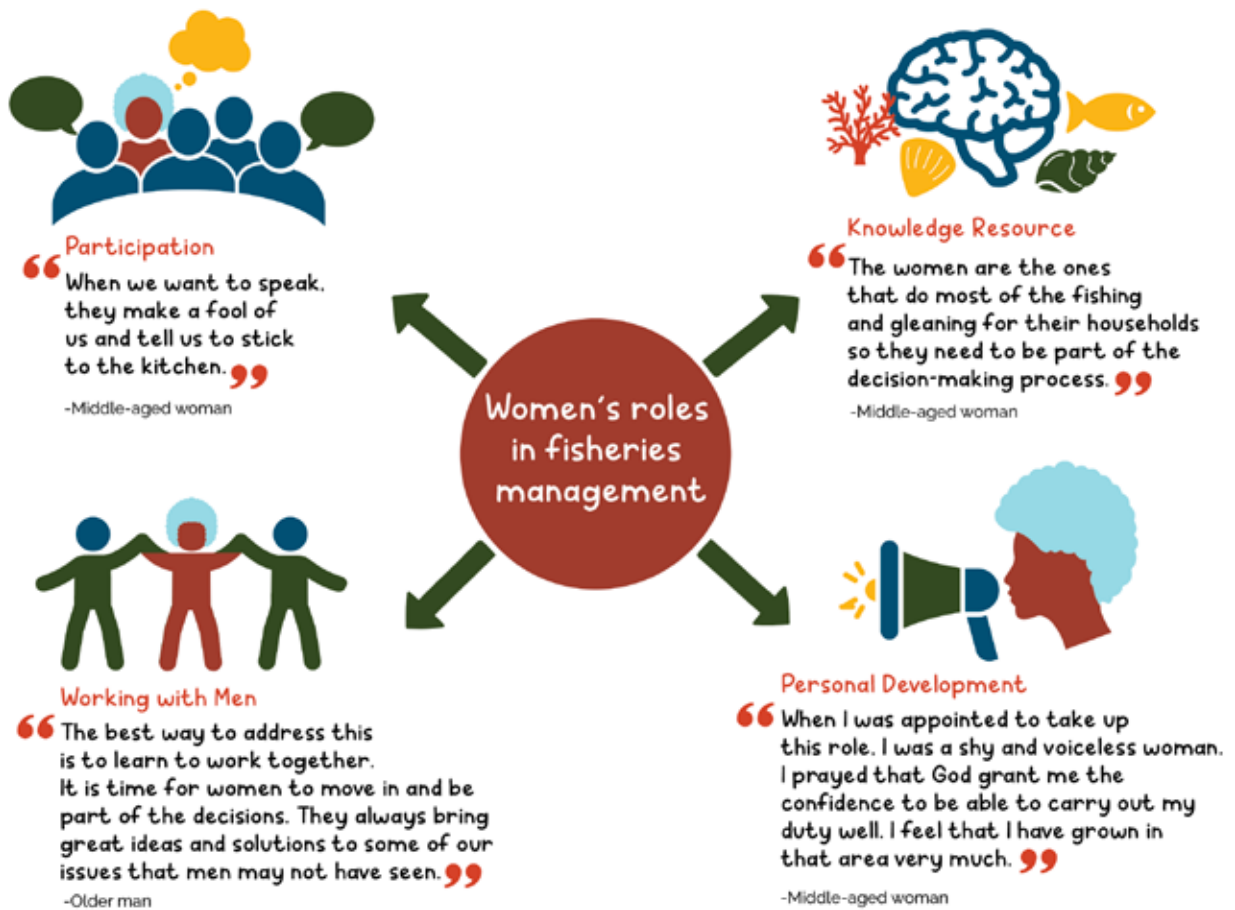
gathering firewood to fishing for food. So, the women know so much more about our seas and land than the men.” A young woman from Village 2 suggested that women’s participation improves fisheries management, “Women often have deep reflections and thoughts that they share about fisheries management because they are the ones fishing and gleaning and know the conditions of our reefs and ocean better.”

The loss of women’s access to fishing areas was frequently mentioned as a cost of failing to include women in decision-making. In three of the four villages where we conducted in-depth interviews, *tabu* areas had been established directly in front of the village, where women fish for food for their families. As a result, women had to travel much further to fish, adding to their time burdens and demanding more physically from them. A middle-aged woman in Village 3 explained, “This *tabu* we currently have, if women were included in the discussion, we would have raised our objections to the places they have placed the *tabu*, as it has made it harder for us to go fishing, as it means a long walk for us to where we are allowed to fish. Because we are the ones that go fishing for household consumption more, we know better as to which places should be *tabu* and which ones should be open for fishing.”

The chairman of the village committee in Village 1 explained that women had been included after-the-fact to correct the problem by removing the *tabu*, “We had a meeting some months ago where the women asked about the *tabu* areas again. I opened up the discussions to have the women speak. Most women asked that the *tabu* be lifted. The outcome of the meeting was that the *tabu* was lifted and the women were allowed to fish from these areas where they couldn’t before. It has made their life easier.” A young man from Village 2 explained that opening the areas to fishing was a direct result of women’s participation in fisheries management, “The area closer to the village is not *tabu*. This to make it easier for women to just go fish, come back, fish, come back. Because it is closer to home. A few reefs in front of the village are open to allow for this, and this was because women asked at the meeting.”

Restrictive gender roles limit women’s participation

Women and men referenced restrictive gender roles to explain why women’s participation is low. An older man from Village 4 said, “Only the men decide these things, not the women. Women have their place in other things and roles.” A young woman from the same village explained, “If a woman speaks up [at the village meeting], she will be snubbed, as it is still not accepted for women to be part of the decision-making.” However, many women expressed frustration at these restrictive roles. A middle-aged woman from Village 4 said, “The biggest challenge we face as women is the opposition from our men. Most of the men in this village still believe women are not to speak at meetings about matters like this. When we want to speak, they make a fool of us and tell us to stick to the kitchen.” Yet gender roles are shifting, opening a door for women’s participation to shift, too. A middle-aged man in Village 1 said, “The women are always neglected in our tradition. They are always left out of decision-making. We need that to change because their roles in the traditional definition have changed as well. They have become more the provider than most men.”



iTaukei women are not homogeneous, and interviews suggest that their interaction with fisheries management differs according to their intersecting age, marital status, and migrant status. For example, a young woman who married into Village 4 said, “The men decide these things. The women and young ones like me who marry into the village, we just attend the meetings to listen. I don’t usually feel comfortable voicing my thoughts on issues discussed. For us, I feel we are too young, and also women are at these meetings to listen, not to decide.” A middle-aged woman who married into Village 2 connected her challenges with fisheries management to the centralised system. She said, “Anything about fisheries in this village, I have no right to speak on. An example is the licenses they are issuing for the harvest of sea cucumbers in the months of July and August. The licenses can only be given to people from here who are registered in the *Vola ni Kawa Bula* [the official register of Fijian landowners]. That approach discriminates against women who marry into the village, even though they have been performing their roles in the village in terms of village obligations.”

Women and men have very different perceptions of how much women are participating in fisheries management in their village. When asked, “Do women participate in fisheries management in this village?” 20 out of 24 men (83%) answered yes; meanwhile, only 11 out of 31 (35%) women answered yes. Interview responses indicate that, while women have a representative at village fisheries management meetings, this representative does not hold decision-making authority. For example, a middle-aged woman from Village 2 described the last meeting she attended, saying, “The men

led the meeting from beginning to end. The women, we are present but only as listeners... The women’s representative, even if she is present at the *bose vanua* [meeting of the district’s chiefs], she does not speak. She has a seat at the meeting, but as a listener participant.”

Locally led pathways to increasing women’s participation

Women universally expressed a desire to participate more. Women and men both highlighted the role that men can play as allies supporting women’s participation. “We start from our homes if we want change in the community” (young woman from Village 1) was a sentiment echoed by many. An older man from Village 3 said, “The best way to address this is to learn to work together. It is time for women to move in and be part of the decisions. They always bring great ideas and solutions to some of our issues that men may not have seen. Some of these women are even better educated than their men. So, we need to work together and complement each other.”

Already, women find ways to shape decision-making. A middle-aged woman in Village 1 said, “Us women, we are *liga kaukauwa* [a Fijian idiom, ‘make things happen out of nothing’]. When we want something, we will make sure we get it, regardless of the obstacles... when the men want to do something, it is the women and their support that make it happen.”

Some pathways offered by external entities attempted to address gender equity but fell short, for example a young woman in Village 1 suggested, “More awareness workshops

that include men and addresses the importance of working together with women on issues like these. Women also need to be part of the workshops. Most times when workshops like these are brought to the villages, the women are more concerned about the food to feed the participants and end up in the kitchen rather than being present in these workshops.” A middle-aged man from Village 1 diagnosed the problem thusly, “People try to please the NGOs and government officials that come to us and easily accept what’s being presented to us, sacrificing their own opinions and beliefs.”

Conclusion

Our study shows that procedural justice in fisheries management is directly tied to environmental sustainability goals. Participating in coastal fisheries management yields perceptions of numerous ecological and social benefits for participants. Women are more likely to perceive benefits from fisheries management and to support management when they participate in it and when they perceive decision-making to be fair. Furthermore, women’s participation is critical to maintaining their access to their fishing areas, and is likely to increase their compliance with regulations. Women and men agree that women’s participation in fisheries management is important because they are fishers and because they have valuable ecological knowledge to contribute. However, women’s participation is strongly limited by restrictive gender roles. This was especially true for young women and women who married into a village. This study supports prior research demonstrating that token participation is not adequate; though each of the four villages had a women’s representative on the fishing council, having this representative present at meetings did not lead to true decision-making authority. Most women expressed a desire for greater participation. Advances toward greater gender equality in village-level fisheries management must be locally driven, with respect for iTaukei customs and support for community-level champions, and should account for intersecting identities.

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