

Women of the land and sea at the 14th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women: Investing in inclusive and sustainable value chains identified as a regional priority

Natalie Makhoul,¹ Margaret Fox,² Flavia Ciribello³ and Josephine Kalsuak⁴

The contributions, needs and opportunities of women fishers and farmers were identified as regional priorities in the 14th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women, at an international side event with contributors from Vanuatu, Fiji and the Solomon Islands. The side event was attended by 121 participants from development agencies, gender experts from the Pacific region, private sector representatives and staff from relevant national agencies.

Here, we provide a summary of the key points raised at the event as well as the recommendations for a regional outcome document generated during the event's interactive discussion session. We summarise the most relevant calls for actions that are likely to further progress women's economic empowerment along fisheries and agricultural value chains within the conference statement, endorsed by leaders from 20 Pacific Island countries and territories.

Event background

In April 2021, the 14th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women (hereafter, “the Conference”) was convened by the Pacific Community (SPC) with French Polynesia as the host country and chair. Due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, the Conference took place virtually. Over 1000 participants attended the Conference to urge regional and national key players to continue the Pacific journey of progressing gender equality since the Pacific adopted the Beijing Platform in 1995. The theme of the Conference, “Our Ocean, Our Heritage, Our Future – Empowering All Women in the Blue Pacific Continent”, was chosen to reflect the significance of the marine space for Pacific people, as it deeply intertwines with their culture, traditions and way of life while also being a key source of livelihood for many and a stable source of nutritious food for decades. Pacific women are yet to be fully recognised as key players in all aspects of ocean management, governance and the Pacific blue economy; thus, the theme stressed the empowerment potential for women in the present blue Pacific narrative.

A side event focused on women's economic empowerment at land and sea. Inspired by the theme and in respect of the interconnection of the blue Pacific with its land, SPC's Land Resource Division reached out to its partners working in this space to convene the side-event: the Pacific Organic and Ethical Trade Community programme and SPC's Fisheries, Aquaculture, Marine and Ecosystem Division through its Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership (PEUMP) programme, supported by SPC's Human Rights and Social Development division.

The main purpose of the side event was to draw attention to the needs of and opportunities for Pacific women fishers and farmers. The critical need to focus on the often unseen, unrecognised and undervalued contributions of women

farmers and fisheries in the pre- and post-harvest process stood out for many partners who shared these similar observations in their stories. Exploring gendered value chains was highlighted as an area that needs more attention, more investment and more development support. As identified by partners, women's diverse skill-sets in the areas of processing, product development, retailing, marketing, packaging and consumer communication are often self-driven with limited access to training or funding opportunities to further explore new ventures. Value-adding processes for land and marine resources are seen as particularly promising ventures for women and potential drivers of economic empowerment through unfolding and upskilling women's pre-existing knowledge and experience. Moreover, the side event provided an insight into women's leading role in organic value chains, such as virgin coconut oil or handicraft products. Gender-discriminatory practices and a stereotypically structured division of labour were described as obstacles for certain value chains, such as honey production.

Side event format and themes

The side event was titled “Women of the land and sea – women's economic empowerment (WEE) along value chains”. SPC partnered with seven different organisations from the private sector and development agencies, including non-governmental organisations and networks: Loving Islands, Pacific Island Farmers Organisation Network, Rabi Organics, UNDP, UN Women, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and WorldFish. Key messages focused on WEE in the agriculture and fisheries sector in the region, highlighting stories of change that showcased women's journeys in venturing into value-added produce. Their challenges and their success stories were presented.

A storytelling format was used to shift the focus towards the key protagonists of the side event, namely Pacific women who

¹ Pacific Community, Pacific European Union Marine Partnership programme. Email: Nataliemak@spc.int

² Pacific Community, Human Rights and Social Development Programme. Email: Margaretf@spc.int

³ Pacific Community, Pacific Organic and Ethical Trade Community (POETCom). Email: Flaviac@spc.int

⁴ Pacific Community, Human Rights and Social Development Programme. Email: Josephinek@spc.int

are fishers and farmers, entrepreneurs, food inventors, policy makers and game changers. The side event acknowledged the need to apply a holistic approach to value chain development considering the environmental, economic and social factors and the integration of land-based and marine activities within Pacific island and atoll ecosystems. A question and answer panel discussion allowed participants to engage with the speakers, clarify and comment on the presented stories.

Key discussion points

The side event speakers emphasised the importance of women’s traditional knowledge in the context of the land and the sea, their deep connection to these natural spaces and the many cultural and traditional practices that are associated with the land and sea.

Leveraging the principles of organic agriculture highlighting the connection to tradition and culture to operate women-led business, Ms Terikano Beriki from Rabi Organics spoke of the successful Banaban women-led value chain production of organic virgin coconut oil from a remote island in Fiji. She stressed the importance of organic values in line and combined with traditional and indigenous knowledge through a dialogical approach. This combination of organic values and traditional indigenous knowledge was presented as a successful WEE enabler alongside climate-smart agriculture, safe handling of produce and basic organic farming principles. Five key principles used by Rabi Organics were discussed in this context (Fig. 1).

The founder and director of Loving Islands, Litia Taukāve (née Kirwin) stressed the need to invest in value-adding training and support for women alongside support in

accessing equipment and markets for their products. She called upon potential partners to prioritise customisation within interventions, to avoid applying a “cookie cutter approach” that generalises “Pacific women” as a homogenous group and to understand the broader set of gender-discriminatory factors that women farmers and fishers face, such as violence against women, gender-stereotyped working structures as well as the many expectations of women and their multiple roles. These factors create additional burdens that need to be factored in and somehow addressed within any WEE initiative.

Sangeeta Mangubhai, Director of the WCS Fiji Country Programme, and Margaret Fox, Gender and Social Inclusion Adviser at SPC, focused on the importance of breaking down barriers for women in the fisheries space and the importance of making visible the roles and contributions of women along post-harvest and value chain processes. Doing so can validate the vast contributions of women fish workers rather than leaving them invisible in the “gender trap” of the informal economy. Using the example of the Fiji sea cucumber fishery, Fox said that “as the product moved along the value chain, the higher the price got, and the stronger men’s involvement became compared to women’s involvement”. This pattern was also described by other speakers as an area of concern.

The UNDP and UN Women Market for Change (M4C) team shared the video story of Laitap David, a market vendor from Vanuatu. Providing her with the skills and techniques to add value to her produce showed the long-term pay-back impacts of investing in a one-woman-business: the training enabled a huge upgrade for David and her entire family to meet more than just their basic needs. David was the first in her village to build a house with bricks. She also used her



Figure 1. The five key principles used by Rabi Organics.

income to support her four children's education, in line with a typical financial spending pattern of women to ensure their children's basic needs first.

From the Pacific Island Farmers Organisation Network, a female tilapia farmer shared her entrepreneurial journey in a male-dominated sector and her personal growth process of learning how to balance a physically demanding and time-consuming job with her family life. She mentioned two key success factors that have helped her in finding the right balance between farm work and family life while she was able to expand her business and become the president of the Tilapia Fiji network:

- 1) networking initiatives, seeking help and talking to others for advice and exchange; and
- 2) outsourcing work by investing in the "right technical people who are honest and willing to help [me] grow".

Delvene Boso from WorldFish addressed the importance of gender-focused research to provide key information on women's roles in fish value chains. She described their partnership project with the Solomon Islands Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resource and provincial governments to understand more about gender roles and responsibilities in different local communities as well as at the provincial, national and regional level. Women's roles in fisheries value chains are often not captured in the first place; thus, WorldFish named this partnership "follow the fish ... follow the female" to highlight women's leading roles along value chain nodes.

Other common themes raised by speakers were natural disasters and threats related to COVID-19; these were identified as being particularly burdensome to women and exacerbating the stress they face daily in providing for their families. Speakers emphasised that rural women need to be given more attention and more solution-oriented ways of overcoming remoteness-related challenges for transport, resource mobilisation or accessing markets.

Recommendations for the triennial outcome document

The side event concluded with a questions and answers panel session that discussed key recommendations for WEE along fisheries and agriculture value chains. The following recommendations were captured by the organising team:

- While there is no single solution or single recommendation, there is need for a concerted commitment and efforts by all key value chain (VC) stakeholders, at different levels, to create transformative change towards WEE and gender equality while addressing existing and persisting inequalities and development concerns.
- These efforts call for a more holistic and comprehensive approach that can be achieved through partnerships, networking opportunities and knowledge sharing.
- An increased availability of gender-disaggregated data in the agriculture and fisheries sectors is needed to inform effective, relevant and customised interventions and policies rather than a generic, single-type "Pacific Women" lens, acknowledging that women are not a homogeneous group.
- Understanding the nuances of specific women's situations (e.g. women involved in different value chains; urban versus rural contexts) is critical in designing effective VC interventions and broader policies supporting women's roles in VCs.
- This knowledge is needed to create a transformative change in recognising and valuing women's work and their contribution to the agricultural and fishery sectors.
- There is a need to apply a holistic approach to VC interventions that goes beyond economic benefits and considers the ecological and human dimensions as well. Profit is important to all farmers, but women often closely interlink profit and sustainability. Health, food security, social and environmental justice, and community development and responsibilities are key considerations that drive women's choices, attitudes and decisions as producers, entrepreneurs and consumers.
- Mentorship and coaching programmes and training targeting women are critical to build women's confidence. Building their confidence is a first step towards their personal, family and community development. Such programmes contribute to create social networks, guiding women through the VC processes and connecting them with the right stakeholders and opportunities.
- There is a need to recognise and support WEE as a good strategy to achieve all the other Sustainable Development Goals. Investing in WEE has the potential to boost economic and social development for women themselves and the wider community, to support climate change responses and to achieve poverty alleviation.
- For those involved in VC interventions and programmes, it is important to keep a "learning and flexible attitude" to provide relevant trainings for women to meet their specific needs.
- Collaboration with relevant government ministries that work in the agriculture and fisheries space is necessary for such ministries to recognise, have and implement gender-inclusive approaches within their ministries and also roll these out nationally in their work programmes. Without this coordinated effort, gender mainstreaming across sectors including fisheries and agriculture will never be fully realised.

⁵ <https://www.spc.int/sites/default/files/documents/14th%20Triennial%20Conference%20of%20Pacific%20Women%20Eng.pdf>

Results from the outcome document

The side event recommendations were used to inform the outcome statement⁵ of Pacific Ministers for Women (“the Ministerial”), which was endorsed during the Conference on 4 May 2021 by honourable ministers responsible for women’s affairs and/or gender affairs from Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, France, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Palau, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, United States of America, Vanuatu, and Wallis and Futuna. The Conference reaffirmed WEE as fundamental for development and called upon governments, the non-profit sector, faith-based organisations, the private sector and development partners to implement specific actions to progress gender equality outcomes in WEE initiatives.

Within the outcome statement, the most relevant calls for actions that are likely to further progress WEE along fisheries and agricultural value chains are as follows (summary):

- a) Proactively expand opportunities for women to participate in critical sectors and value and remunerate women’s work in all fields.
- b) Implement equitable, inclusive, accessible, resilient and gender-responsive social protection policies and programmes for all women, including those in informal work ... and improve regulatory frameworks and enforcement of labour laws to ensure that these workers have decent paid work and safe workplaces.
- c) Reduce barriers to women’s access to credit and financial services and increase opportunities for education and financial literacy training that can help transition women to formal employment.
- d) Strengthen business leadership by women through targeted business support services, incubation initiatives for women entrepreneurs, business clustering, and opportunities for women to access leadership training and mentoring, including development of career pathways via training and mentoring with particular emphasis on agriculture, fisheries, etc.
- e) Connect development efforts to sustainable livelihood opportunities by ensuring available national and regional markets for product-based development projects and ensuring that vocational training is linked to job market realities.

Other recommendations provide additional enablers to support a striving workforce of women of the land and sea to take on opportunities along value chains. These recommendations include strengthening women’s workers’ rights and tackling gender-based violence. Recommendations on cross-cutting themes, such as gender-responsive climate justice and decision-making or sex-, age- and disability-disaggregated data, are further relevant in creating an enabling environment.

Conclusion and way forward

Shifting the gender equality debate into key economic sectors in the Pacific, such as agriculture and fisheries, with a more specialised outlook for WEE along new ventures of value-added production is a critical step in shaping the commitments of our regional leaders to gender equality and gaining political will and buy-in. Leveraging women’s traditional skills and knowledge combined with their innovation and sustainability-oriented thinking is important to change the WEE narrative. This change can emphasise a broader perspective on livelihoods and welfare that moves beyond the cash-based narrative of traditional economic principles. Furthermore, by appropriately recognising the pivotal role that the fisheries and agriculture sectors have played to sustain generations of Pacific Islanders over centuries, it is only fitting that women are empowered to sustainably earn a decent living and to source nutritious food from the sectors that have sustained them and their communities for generations.

