

# Consultations on gender-based violence in the Pacific fisheries sector

Natalie Makhoul<sup>1</sup> and Julieanne Wickham<sup>2</sup>

*Regional consultations were held to discuss how gender-based violence relates to the Pacific region's fisheries sector – an important consideration. It became clear, that different forms of gender-based violence can occur across fisheries employment operations at sea or onshore as well as across informal supply and value-chains, including marketing lines or at home with negative impacts on the sector and the people at play such as women, men, migrant workers, and other at-risk groups.*

## Background

The first Pacific-wide consultations to discuss potential research on gender-based violence (GBV) related to, or stemming from, the fisheries sector took place on 29 February 2024 in Suva, Fiji. The half-day consultations (virtual and in-person) were organised by the Pacific Community (SPC) and supported by the Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership (PEUMP) programme in collaborative effort between SPC's divisions of Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems (FAME) and Human Rights and Social Development (HRSD).

A need for consultations – as the first step to inform research gaps and needs – emerged during internal discussions between FAME and HRSD, and stipulated by the global research paper led by Dr Sangeeta Mangubhai from Fiji entitled, "Gender-based violence: Relevance for fisheries practitioners", which was supported by SPC PEUMP (Mangubhai et al. 2023). The paper confirmed alarming gaps in the literature at the

international level on this intersecting topic, including in the Pacific. The significant discrepancy between documented information compared with the number of anecdotal stories on GBV in fisheries in the Pacific was also observed by SPC in the development of the Pacific handbook for human rights, gender equity and social inclusion in tuna industries (Barclay et al. 2023). Given the significance of fisheries for food security, livelihoods, employment, culture and broader socioeconomic benefits of Pacific people, it is imperative that research be conducted using a sector lens to examine GBV issues. The relevance of GBV in fisheries using a sector lens would help us to understand the triggers, underlying root causes and industry impacts, and determine the scope for action to address issues related to, or stemming, from the fisheries sector. The prevalence of violence against women in the Pacific is alarmingly high with UN Women warning that it is among the highest in the world (about twice the global average), with evidence showing that up to 68% of Pacific women are reported to be affected. Addressing GBV is a regional and national priority, supported by numerous commitments at both the national and regional level.



Group photo of in-person participants, and (bottom) virtual participants.  
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<sup>1</sup> Pacific Community (SPC), Pacific-European Union Marine Partnership programme. nataliemak@spc.int  
<sup>2</sup> Pacific Community (SPC), Human Rights and Social Development division. julieanne@spc.int

While acknowledging that the range of stakeholders is quite broad and spans many sectors, obtaining the opinions, support and buy-in of key stakeholders as well as their assistance as experts on research priorities, needs and gaps was unquestionably a vital step in shaping SPC's future interventions. Key stakeholders from government agencies responsible for fisheries and gender and women's affairs, non-governmental and intergovernmental organisations working on fisheries or related matters, fishing industry representatives, and national and regional GBV networks (including faith-based organisations) were invited to be part of the consultations. Twenty-five participants attended (both in-person and virtually), with regional representatives and country representatives from the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu.

The diversity of stakeholders enabled nuanced discussions exploring the relevance of GBV in a variety of contexts and situations in line with the purpose of the consultations' purpose. This also allowed a broad and open definition of the fisheries sector that included onshore and offshore activities, coastal fisheries (including aquaculture), and activities ranging from large-scale commercial to small-scale and the community level. In the discussions, GBV was not limited to a specific form of violence, but was more comprehensively discussed and guided by the following categories: physical, sexual, emotional and economic, including culture, as an underlying factor that can perpetuate other forms of violence.

### Setting the scene – contextualising GBV issues related to, or stemming from, the fisheries sector

The consultations started with introductory presentations on the matter to set the scene for the consultations. These introductory presentations included:

- 1 An opening speech that highlighting the increasing socioeconomic pressure on small-scale fishers exacerbated by climate change impacts on blue foods and marine spaces with the potential to spike GBV risks. Furthermore, the women-dominated fish processing workforce and the women-dominated fish market frontline was highlighted as an at-risk group to experience forms of GBV in formal and informal workspaces and at home.
- 2 An overview on GBV issues from a regional perspective, which highlighted commitments and frameworks to address GBV as a regional priority with a reference made to the Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights (2018–2030)<sup>1</sup> and the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration (2012).<sup>2</sup> The overview included sharing GBV statistics for the Pacific, and emphasised the national level actions taken, with 15 Pacific Island countries having passed legislation to address domestic and family violence.

- 3 A presentation of key findings from a global context showcasing how different forms of GBV have been associated with the fisheries sector. These included, a) physical violence in the forms of human trafficking, forced labour or child labour and largely impacting men, boys and people of diverse gender and sexual orientations fuelled by ideas of (hyper)masculinity promoted on boats; b) linkages of human rights abuses in illegal, unreported, undocumented (IUU) fishing; c) highly gendered sexual violence in and around port areas with money or other goods being exchanged for sexual services (transactional sex) and an increasingly documented "sex-for fish" practice, leaving female fish workers exposed to sexual and/or economic violence; or d) the fisheries sector is not neutral to the local context it operates in, and so social norms and underlying cultural practices and power dynamics do intersect with fisheries activities and can trigger, enable or reinforce forms of GBV. in sociocultural values and norm systems, cultural practices intersecting with different forms of GBV.

- 4 A presentation on GBV in Pacific fisheries, highlighting the lack of documented information despite the growing body of research on gender in fisheries. References were made to the recent analysis on gender and social inclusion in tuna fisheries in the Pacific (Maui et al. 2023; K. Barclay unpublished report) were noted. Barclay's report confirms that there are GBV risks for women working as crew on fishing vessels, and highlights the growing number of female fisheries observers emphasising the highly gender-segregated workforce on fishing vessels (mainly men) and in processing (mainly women), with gender-specific risks experiencing forms of GBV for both women and men. Furthermore, while human rights in the Pacific's fisheries sector are receiving more attention (e.g. articles, projects, regional dialogues), these topics seem to be more broadly discussed under the human rights framework in commercial fishing contexts and with a focus on labour rights rather than specifically addressing or unpacking GBV in the context of informal small-scale fisheries. A few case studies and findings on GBV-related issues are documented in the Pacific handbook for human rights, gender equity and social inclusion in tuna industries (Barclay et al. 2023). These include incidences concerning physical violence at sea, sexual violence as a major safety concern for trained women crew members and observers in their line of work, and GBV concerns of tuna processing workers, most of whom are women. The literature on coastal fisheries-related gender does not provide much information on GBV, but limited research subtly indicates there are GBV risks for women fishers and fish workers who take on new or extended fishing activities that are commonly associated with men. These changes in gender roles can stir power dynamics at home, leaving women vulnerable to GBV. Market-related GBV incidences in the Pacific are better understood and documented, although they are not analysed to understand fisheries-related specifics and miss the link with economic violence. Growing

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.spc.int/sites/default/files/wordpresscontent/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PPA-2018-Part-I-EN2.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/Revitalised%20Pacific%20Leaders%20Gender%20Equality%20Declaration.pdf>



pressure on women to fish more or expand their fishing activities for food and/or income because of changing demographics, growing food insecurities exacerbated by climate change, and associated lifestyle changes, to name a few, are additional indications suggesting a potential link with GBV.

- 5 There is a likelihood that these growing stressors and changing gender roles can heighten GBV risks as they are embedded in Pacific sociocultural systems that influence fishing activities and vice versa.

A summary of key messages, recommendations and potential actions by fisheries practitioners and stakeholders to address GBV were presented in concluding remarks (see box).

## What was discussed?

Following the introductory presentations, consultations were held using a break-out group format with two virtual groups and one in-person group. To ensure a diversity of stakeholders, participants were initially divided into the region's three subregions: Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. The in-person group, however, consisted solely of stakeholders in Fiji (Suva in particular), with a small number representing the regional level. Nevertheless, only two virtual groups with a more diverse geographic representation were created because of last-minute cancellations and some virtual participants withdrawing owing to erratic internet connectivity.

The participants discussed the following three questions in their break-out groups:

- 1 Do you see a need to investigate GBV issues related to, or stemming from, the fisheries sector?
- 2 What could the scale for potential research look like?
  - a Geographic scale: Should it be a regional study? Or selected countries? If selected, which countries should we focus on?
  - b Thematic focus: What are the topics we should focus on?
  - c Do you have suggestions or ideas for the research methodology?
- 3 Are there any other aspects that we should consider?

The second part of the consultations were held using an open plenary discussion to better understand the ways and approaches to engage with GBV networks, given the interdisciplinary nature of the proposed field of research with currently no established forms of engagement between fisheries and GBV stakeholders.

## Consultations outcomes

The consultations confirmed a research need on GBV related to the fisheries sector in the Pacific with all stakeholders across government, civil society, regional organisations and the industry agreeing that a study will not only allow a better

### Key messages, recommendations and potential actions by fisheries practitioners and stakeholders to address GBV

- There is increased recognition of the gender dimensions of fisheries but fisheries practitioners have not yet seriously addressed GBV issues.
- While there is a growing body of evidence of physical and sexual GBV in fisheries, there is comparatively less research on the psychological, economic violence and related cultural aspects.
- The literature often focuses on industrial fishing and abuse of labour rights at sea, with less emphasis on small-scale fisheries and along the informal or processing value chains where women often dominate.
- There is limited recognition and investment in GBV in fisheries policies, practices and institutions.
- Addressing GBV is inherently part of working on gender, and cannot be disentangled from other actions taken to address gender inequality, and should be integral to any work on improving the social benefits from fisheries.

understanding of GBV issues related to, or stemming from the fisheries sector, but that it would and should also provide an important guidance on actionable and practical steps that the sector can take to address GBV issues. Most stakeholders shared anecdotal stories on GBV with little documented research being known that captures GBV in fisheries-related matters. Often GBV-related aspects come out in side-stories when gender issues are discussed more broadly. The nature of coastal fisheries and offshore fisheries varies drastically so that participants recommended that the two be looked at separately.

## Thematic focus

A brief summary of participants' commonly shared views and key points regarding the thematic focus for a potential study as discussed during break-out-groups is provided:

- Small-scale marketing including value chains and GBV-related aspects looking at safety, health and well-being, harassment risks, conflict potential in crowded market spaces, teasing and bullying, inequalities related to bargaining powers.
- Changes in power dynamics and the reverse consequences of women's economic empowerment, changing gender roles in fisheries and behaviour linked to control, jealousy, shame, economic, emotional and physical violence.
- Growing food insecurity pressure on women and men from climate change-related environmental changes and how this can lead to GBV.

- Cultural norms and practices in fisheries that can perpetuate GBV.
- Domestic violence as part of GBV. Violence experienced in domestic spheres can have impacts on women and their fishing activities, both formal and informal fish work. It is not enough to look at workplace-related issues of GBV.
- Community-based fisheries management related to decision-making and conflict potential from resource management measures.
- In male-dominated offshore fishing industries, men's experiences with GBV such as hypermasculinity and the risks for people with diverse gender identities and different sexual orientation should also be considered.
- There is a growing number of women who are fisheries observers and female trained crew, resulting in associated GBV risks.
- Community perceptions of cannery workers. Based on experience of faith-based organisations, which provide community counselling, fish cannery workers who are predominantly rural women sought counselling frequently due to the stigma they faced in the community because of their work in the canneries.
- Connecting to GBV support services, including the role of faith-based organisations. Services for survivors of GBV are often available through civil society, including faith-based organisations. In many instances these organisations provide referral support to health care providers, legal aid or other needed services on a case-by-case basis. The fisheries sector and people working in this sector are often unaware and not connected to such service systems because GBV may not be understood as a relevant topic in fisheries.
- GBV behaviour and experiences start in the community and are carried over into work structures.
- Men on fishing vessels are often at sea for long periods of time, and there are resulting risks of GBV when they return home.
- Working conditions offshore and in processing plants.
- Transactional sex, child labour and human trafficking and the GBV lens. While issues related to transactional sex, child labour and human trafficking are human rights issues that occur in commercial fisheries contexts, these issues are rarely looked at from a gender perspective and or how gender perceptions (including masculinity dynamics of mostly exclusive male crews) can enable or trigger forms of violence.

## Geographic focus

With regards to the geographic scope of a potential study, participants agreed to a regional study with selected country case studies or a subregional approach to capture regional issues with localised research at national levels. Different criteria for the selection of countries for case studies were shared for consideration. These included but were not limited to:

- countries with significant commercial operations including onshore processing;
- countries with best practices on tackling GBV;
- countries where women do not fish much because of strong cultural barriers and beliefs; and/or
- countries with an existing baseline.

## Methodology

Common views were shared regarding ideas and tips for the methodology to be used. All groups referred to pre-existing methodologies used in GBV that are currently being practised in the Pacific, generally a mix of qualitative and quantitative instruments. Participants suggested to look at existing sector studies on GBV that can be used or adopted. Strong ethical considerations were highlighted as being important to include in research approaches, such as standard operating procedures for researchers and research participants as social safeguards. The need to tailor approaches to Pacific GBV realities was also discussed, and this could be done using story formats.

## How will the outcomes be used?

The outcomes of the consultations will be used to inform SPC's next steps in supporting a regional study on GBV in fisheries.

## References

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