

Women in Fisheries Network¹

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Through needs-based training and capacity development, the Fiji-based Women in Fisheries Network hopes to aid women's value-added participation in the fisheries sector

Despite women playing a crucial role in the marine environment, particularly in the fisheries economy, their contribution is poorly acknowledged. Women fishers generally dominate inshore fisheries in many countries of the Pacific region and play important roles in both subsistence and commercial fisheries, but have poor access to training and are not strongly engaged in decision-making on fisheries development and management. Since 2016, the Women in Fisheries Network (WIFN), Fiji, has turned its attention to many of these issues. One important activity has been research into specific areas identified under a study done on the status of fisheries in Fiji.

Although there has been substantive progress in some areas of fisheries regarding women's participation, mostly in relation to the marketing and distribution of products, several challenges remain. Many of these challenges relate to the non-enumeration of women in fisheries because they mainly work in the subsistence sector and the informal sector. The lack of information and data on women's participation in different aspects of the fisheries makes it difficult to assess the economic contribution of women in the numerous fisheries sectors and activities in which they are engaged.

There is little documentation on the various aspects and dynamics of seafood marketing with respect to the involvement of women. Transportation needs and access to markets and market space are still some of the main challenges women face in their selling and distributing activities. Lack of direct access to credit and finances restrict women from participating equally in the fisheries sector. Most community-based work suffers from a dearth of women trainers and facilitators. Although women are included, sometimes strategic approaches to gender are not. Most work done to assist women in fisheries has a narrowly defined focus and therefore has little impact.

There is a great need for research into participation of all ethnic groups in fisheries, and new fisheries legislation and other policies on fisheries resource use, marketing and distribution mechanisms to enable the full engagement of fisherwomen. Some research undertaken by the WIFN includes looking into the mud crab and *kai* (freshwater

mussels) fishery, which is providing crucial information that could assist in the sustainable harvest of these species.

To commemorate International Women's Day on 8 March 2017, and in recognition of our women fishers, the WIFN hosted a meeting, the Women in Fisheries Forum, which created a space where various stakeholders could discuss the progress and challenges faced by women in the fisheries sector. One of the main targets of the forum was to network and build the capacity and the reach of the WIFN. The forum brought in stakeholders including representatives from the government, conservation practitioners, civil society organisations and fishing communities to present the latest science, management, development and policy work on women in the fisheries sector. It also created a space for dialogue with women fishers to listen and learn more about their issues, needs and priorities. Issues discussed included how women fishers can be connected to seafood supply chains to enhance their businesses; value chain analysis of freshwater mussel; the impact of Tropical Cyclone Winston on some fisheries; as well as discussions on the organisations and associations that the network could work with.

As the Status of Women in Fisheries in Fiji report had earlier found, gender disparities are evident in most areas of work in Fiji, including the fisheries sector. Women's involvement is mainly in the informal, as opposed to the formal, sector. Studies have shown that with only 109,000 females in the formal labour force, and 121,000 registered as doing 'household work', more than a half of women's work is being defined as 'economically inactive' because it is in the household (and unpaid) category. Most fishing activities for household consumption done by women are in the subsistence sector; these are therefore not enumerated and fall into the unpaid work category. Studies have also shown that women spend more time than men on work overall, have fewer hours in paid work, and, in general, have less discretionary time than men.

Work on gender issues in Fiji is directed by eight major international agreements on gender equality and the advancement of women. Three of these are the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

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(CEDAW), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Pacific Platform for Action, which provide an opportunity for reporting on the state of women in the country. The challenge is whether the provisions from these instruments, such as those relating to non-discrimination by sex, and equal access to resources and opportunities, are reflected in fisheries policies or their implementation. In February 2014, the Fiji National Gender Policy was launched with a mission to promote gender equity, equality, social justice and sustainable development through the promotion of 'active and visible gender mainstreaming in all sectors'. The promotion of gender mainstreaming will become a part of government work in the fisheries sector and this will provide opportunities for more gender-focused initiatives, which will raise the profile of women's engagement and role in fisheries. To enable the inclusion of women fishers in discussion at the national level, the WIFN has to direct more efforts towards engaging with the Department of Women, and finding new ways to work on the Fiji National Gender Policy in areas that relate to women in fisheries. Business representatives at the Women in Fisheries Forum, as well as the regional organisation PIPSO (Pacific Islands Private Sector Organization), which looks after small business enterprises and the involvement of women, helped facilitate the discussion on opportunities and challenges in the private and marketing sector.

A highlight of the Women in Fisheries Forum was a session where women fishers from rural locations in Fiji shared their experiences, challenges and aspirations. This opened the space for discussions on practical issues that women face daily in their fisheries participation. This very informal session, titled *talanoa* ('talking to each other'), was a break from the traditional format of the conference. The session provided a much-needed space for women to sit and discuss

issues openly. Although the women were from different parts of the country, the challenges they faced and their concerns were similar. These include the lack of formal support for the work that women fishers do; the participation of women throughout the fisheries supply chain; and the economic empowerment opportunities that the women are busy with, along with the traditional, gender-based obligations and commitments they are expected to fulfil in the communities they come from. These women are still the primary caregivers in their families and are not released from this role when they engage in economic activities, thus having to shoulder a double burden of work. Women are still dominant fishers in the inshore areas, gleaning, collecting and using traditional skills and knowledge to forage for seafood both for home consumption and to sell. As more and more rural areas of Fiji are being infiltrated by the modern market economy, many coastal rural households are becoming dependent on women's income-generating activities to secure their livelihoods. Most women engage in these activities without any proper training or skills, using whatever resources are available to earn income. Because of the informal nature of their engagement in the economic sector of the fisheries, women lose out in many ways: they do not know how to set prices; they lack bargaining power; they have little knowledge of issues related to quality and safe processing techniques; and they have little or no access to secure finance to set up small, professional businesses.

The WIFN, in its strategic plan, aims to engage women in training and capacity building to enhance their practical and value-added engagement in the fisheries sector. The network hopes to assist women by facilitating them in the work they already do in the different sectors of fisheries.



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