

Fiji's Northern Division hosts its first Women in Fisheries Forum

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The first Women in Fisheries Forum for the Northern Division took place in Labasa, Fiji, on 15 May 2018. It was hosted by the Ministry of Fisheries, the Wildlife Conservation Society, the Fiji Locally-Managed Marine Area Network (FLMMA), and the Women in Fisheries Network–Fiji. The Forum was chaired by Margaret Tabunakawai-Vakalalabure, FLMMA Coordinator.

Background

Women play an important but poorly acknowledged role in coastal fisheries in Fiji, contributing to food security and local livelihoods (Vunisea 2016). In addition to being fishers, women are involved in freshwater and marine aquaculture, and play important roles as middle sellers, processors and market sellers, and in small and medium enterprises including post-harvest value adding. Women engage in a wider diversity of fisheries than men, and therefore can be disproportionately impacted if the habitats they access are damaged (Chaston Radway et al. 2016).

Despite their level of involvement in the coastal fisheries sector, women are largely undervalued, overlooked and receive little direct support from government or non-government organisations. They are often missing from important discussions about local priorities and natural resource management strategies due to childcare, household obligations, and traditional roles within their community. Women also have poor access to information and financial resources, and receive little training to build their capacity to manage their fisheries for food and/or livelihoods.

Fiji's National Gender Policy emphasises that gender must be mainstreamed into all sectors, including fisheries. This requires concerted efforts and collaboration with various agencies and partners, with due consideration to national, regional and international policies, agreements and commitments. Whilst gender mainstreaming has already begun at various levels of ministries, challenges remain in terms of the allocation of adequate resources (e.g. funding, human) towards women in the fisheries sector. For example, despite the large, diverse and growing role women play in the fisheries sector, the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation does not have any fisheries programmes to support their needs.

The 'Northern Division Women in Fisheries Forum', hosted by the Ministry of Fisheries in partnership with the Wildlife

Conservation Society (WCS), the Fiji Locally-Managed Marine Area Network (FLMMA) and the Women in Fisheries Network–Fiji, held in Labasa on 15 May 2018, brought together 18 women from 16 districts across the provinces of Bua, Cakaudrove and Macuata on the island of Vanua Levu.

The forum, the first for the Northern Division, provided an opportunity for women fishers to meet to discuss, network and identify ways to increase the recognition of the important role they play in Fiji's coastal fisheries sector. The forum explored pathways or approaches to assist and empower women in the fisheries sector, to ensure their long-term contribution to food security, livelihoods and the national economy.

Challenges and opportunities for women in the fisheries sector

During the forum a number of challenges or barriers that are faced by women in the coastal fisheries sector in Fiji were identified:

- Poor understanding around fair pricing of seafood products makes it difficult for women to negotiate prices with middlemen. As a result, many women are still selling at the same price as 10–15 years ago, with the result that earnings remain low.
- Lack of awareness on post-harvest and food handling techniques to ensure a high level of food hygiene. Many women were interested in receiving training to improve the way they processed and handled seafood, but there were few opportunities to improve their knowledge and skills.
- Lack of access to a wide diversity of markets, to ice and to proper market facilities for selling their seafood. For example, when the women go to the ice plant they often find there is no ice left, as the middlemen have arrived earlier and purchased all the ice to ship their fish to Suva. Some women, especially those in more remote areas, also lack easy access to shops selling fishing gear.
- Strong views were expressed on the lack of respect for the unique viewpoints and inputs from women during village, district or provincial meetings. Many women felt their views were taken lightly at village meetings (*Bose Vakoro*) and rarely given importance or

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priority at traditional meetings (*Bose Vanua*). The *Bose Vanua* is considered the highest forum in the *iTaukei* governance system. The women noted that some district resource management committees did not have women represented, such as in Kubulau and Vuya.

- There were concerns that women were not able to protect marine resources during spawning seasons. The women are aware of the spawning grounds and seasons and a greater involvement in management decisions would help them protect these areas. For some, there was a scarcity of fishing grounds for women to utilise, or fishing grounds were too far away from the village.
- Many women highlighted that poor land practices – such as inadequate waste management, run-off from nearby farms, the overuse of weedicides and improper disposal of rubbish – were impacting the habitats where women fish and glean. Some raised concerns about the impact of climate change on fisheries, and the habitats where they fish.
- Lastly, some women stated their husbands did not advocate for the involvement of women and many consider or treat women as subordinate. There is the pervasive cultural norm that women ‘belong to the kitchen’, and the chores and responsibilities of a household are placed on their shoulders, preventing them from branching out and getting involved in crucial meetings on decisions relating to natural resources. Women felt that there was a ‘yolk’ or ‘veil’ that should be removed from wider society to enable them to be equally engaged and involved in decisions around natural resource management. Some women expressed the view that if this was not resolved in the near future, and with increasingly numbers of educated women, women would start exercising the provisions of the constitution regarding gender equality.
- Formation of women fishers’ associations to give women a stronger collective voice on natural resource management and for negotiating with middlemen for fair pricing.
- Making low-tech fishing gear used by women (e.g. handlines and hand nets) available in smaller shops and/or canteens in the villages.
- Improving communication between women in a village, and teaching them new techniques on how to voice their opinions in ways that are more likely to be heard and respected.
- Investing more in ensuring equal involvement of marginalised women in established committees and in other village social activities. Existing or established groups in the village should have at least one or two women in the group who will hear the women’s perspective, with women being encouraged to take up more executive positions within the group.
- Advocate for more funding mechanisms that target the involvement of women, so that it becomes a core part of the design and implementation of fisheries projects.
- Raising awareness for men so they are more informed of national laws that promote and support equal opportunity for women, and therefore the involvement of women at every level within organisations.

The women participants highlighted a number of approaches that might help improve the inclusion of women in the planning and management of coastal fisheries, some of which have been successfully tested. Three examples were provided:

- A number of women were involved in established committees and used the opportunity to raise issues important to themselves and other women. There were positive examples of their concerns being heard at village meetings (*Bose Vakoro*), when elders gave the women a chance to speak.
- An example of high-level leadership by a woman. In one of the villages in Lekutu District, a woman is the paramount chief and as a result other women in the village were bolder in voicing their concerns.
- There were some examples of more well-educated women providing advice at village meetings, particularly in terms of establishing small businesses.

New ideas that women highlighted that might be worth testing in the future included:

References

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