



## “The ocean is my land”: Understanding unintended outcomes of tuna fisheries development in Suva, Fiji

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*The gendered roles and impacts of offshore fisheries, their development and management policy are under-studied, including with reference to impacts on men and masculinity. Here, we describe new research underway with communities in Fiji involved in the tuna fishery sector.*

Tuna fisheries in the Pacific are complex and form parts of much larger systems. However, their governance and thus their management is simplified and addressed in silos. Research into understanding tuna fisheries focuses on biology, stock assessment, environment and climate research, with little on economics and scant attention to social research (Evans et al., 2015; Keen et al., 2018b; Moore et al., 2020). Social issues such as gender are rarely included. Therefore, the state of knowledge to enable clear framing of gender issues in tuna fisheries is nascent. Moreover, donor-funded research

on gender work is project-based and not in the core work of institutions, in contrast to fields such as stock assessments.

The health of a fishery can be thought of in terms of the health of the biological resource and the health of the socio-economic system of its use. Majuro plots present the stock status of the four main commercially harvested tuna stocks of the Pacific Islands region (albacore, bigeye, skipjack, yellowfin) as “healthy” (FFA and Pacific Community 2020). But these Majuro plots do not represent the health of the social–ecological system, which is showing signs of failure in social and economic systems.

There is a dearth of social–ecological research that focuses on offshore fisheries (for example, Nikolic et al. (2017) reviews albacore tuna biology, fisheries, and management with no reference to social and/or ecological studies). There is even less recent research and literature on gender research in tuna fisheries, although this field is evolving (O’Neill et al. 2018; Prieto-Carolino et al. 2021). The majority of studies frame gender as women and men binaries, focusing on women’s role rather than wider gender patterns (Manez and Pauwelussen 2016). The relatively few gender studies that have focused on men have missed masculinity perspectives (Seeley and Allison 2005). However, there is evidence of “opening up” the gender lens to include masculinities and intersectionality (Ferguson 2021).

In terms of tuna fisheries, social research has focused more on human rights issues onboard vessels at sea, and most of these studies are considered gender blind (Finkbeiner et al. 2017). This limitation excludes women’s participation onshore in pre- and post-harvest activities, which as Keen et al. (2018a, p. 339) argue, “leaves women potentially vulnerable to economic, physical, and social disadvantage.” Also excluded are the reproductive and unpaid support roles that women provide while men are away for long periods of time at sea.

The importance of applying a gender lens is well recognised (Williams 2008). Its application, through evidence-based studies for adaptive and gender-equitable strategies, has deepened understandings of fishers and fishing communities

Josaia Cama walking back from the fields to interview in Waiqanake Village. © Patricia Kailola



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(Ferguson 2021) by revealing how social differences and power relations can be constructed and/or maintained (Kawarazuka et al. 2017). Using gender as a lens “provides a better view of the whole industry and social context” (Williams 2008, p. 180). In addition, gender analysis is useful for integrating social research with research on social–ecological systems.

In our forthcoming place-based study, gender will be used as a lens to capture and reveal the role of women and gendered interrelationships in tuna fisheries in Fiji. In using the gender lens, we hope to reveal unintended consequences of fisheries development and governance processes on social–ecological systems and, in particular, on women and men in the tuna fishery.

To investigate gender roles and gender relations in tuna fisheries and to understand the gendered impact of fisheries development and policy, a mixed-methods, place-specific study approach was applied during 2018 to 2020. This study included a two-week visit in May 2019 to the city of Suva and two villages, Waiqanake and Kalekana, within Fiji. The research questions, places of interest, and methods (including the gender lens) were developed after a year of preliminary research (based on online interviews and desktop research) on characterising the Pacific tuna social–ecological system. Research questions include: “what role do women play in tuna fisheries in Fiji” and “how has the development of the fishery affected them.”

To gather data from people with a broad spectrum of interests, positions and knowledge regarding tuna fishing, 19 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with key representatives including tuna fishing industry representatives, independent consultants involved in fisheries management, regional fisheries managers, staff of non-governmental organisations, academics, recreational fishers, and fishers in Waiqanake village. In addition, a semi-structured focus discussion group was held in Kalekana village with six women who had lost family members on tuna fishing vessels. Participants were asked to explore the role that

women play in tuna fisheries in Fiji and to comment on their perceptions of how the current local and regional policies and practices affect women and gender generally. Managing gender issues was a particular topic of discussion.

Using the information from this place-specific study, we hope to examine gender roles and gender relations in terms of their state, process and key interlinkages, and to illuminate any changes, with particular attention paid to the unintended outcomes of local fisheries policies.

We are interested in understanding how power is allocated between communities and fishers, industry, and the wider social–ecological system. We draw on insights from political ecology and feminist political ecology in the context of social–ecological systems. We also draw on a characterisation of the social–ecological system of Western and Central Pacific tuna fisheries to connect gender issues within their wider tuna-related social and ecological networks. This research contributes to gender and fisheries studies and identifies how gender intersects with other dimensions to result in unintended outcomes of fisheries development and policy.

The new research described here is part of my PhD research *Understanding and governing the ocean using the rationale of social–ecological systems: A transdisciplinary analysis of Pacific tuna fisheries*. My research applies a Social–ecological Ocean’s Framework (developed in the research) to understand complex ocean social–ecological networks and how that knowledge can be applied in ecosystem-based management approaches. Gender and climate change will be used as lenses for conceptually modelling social–ecological system networks and discovering unintended consequences of policy and development initiatives. Its publication is planned by 2022 and the findings will be shared with the research participants, policy makers (such as those in the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission and FFA), and villages that I visited.

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Victoria Syddall undertaking social ecological research. © Patricia Kailola



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Women worker at Fiji Fish. © Patricia Kailola

