

Gender issues in culture, agriculture and fisheries in Fiji

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Introduction

The Republic of Fiji is an island nation with over 330 islands with a total land area of 18,333 square kilometres. Its exclusive economic zone covers an area of 1.29 million square kilometres. One third of the islands are inhabited and most of these are volcanic in origin. The largest islands are Viti Levu (10,390 square kilometres) and Vanua Levu (5,538 square kilometres) (Figure 1). They make up about 87 per cent of Fiji's landmass and are home to about 90 per cent of Fiji's population.

Fiji is divided into four main divisions, the Central, Northern, Eastern and Western Divisions. It is further divided

into fourteen provinces. Most government ministries have offices at the divisional level that oversee administrative matters and some ministries have offices at the provincial level. Provinces are further separated into 187 districts. District councils oversee Fijian village affairs, and the government administration at this level is in the hands of the district and provincial officers.

Fiji's economy is largely dependent on natural resources such as agriculture, sugar, fisheries and forestry. Tourism is mainly private sector driven and has grown significantly over the years.

Fiji has made considerable progress in recognising gender issues in relation to legal and human rights; and to gender

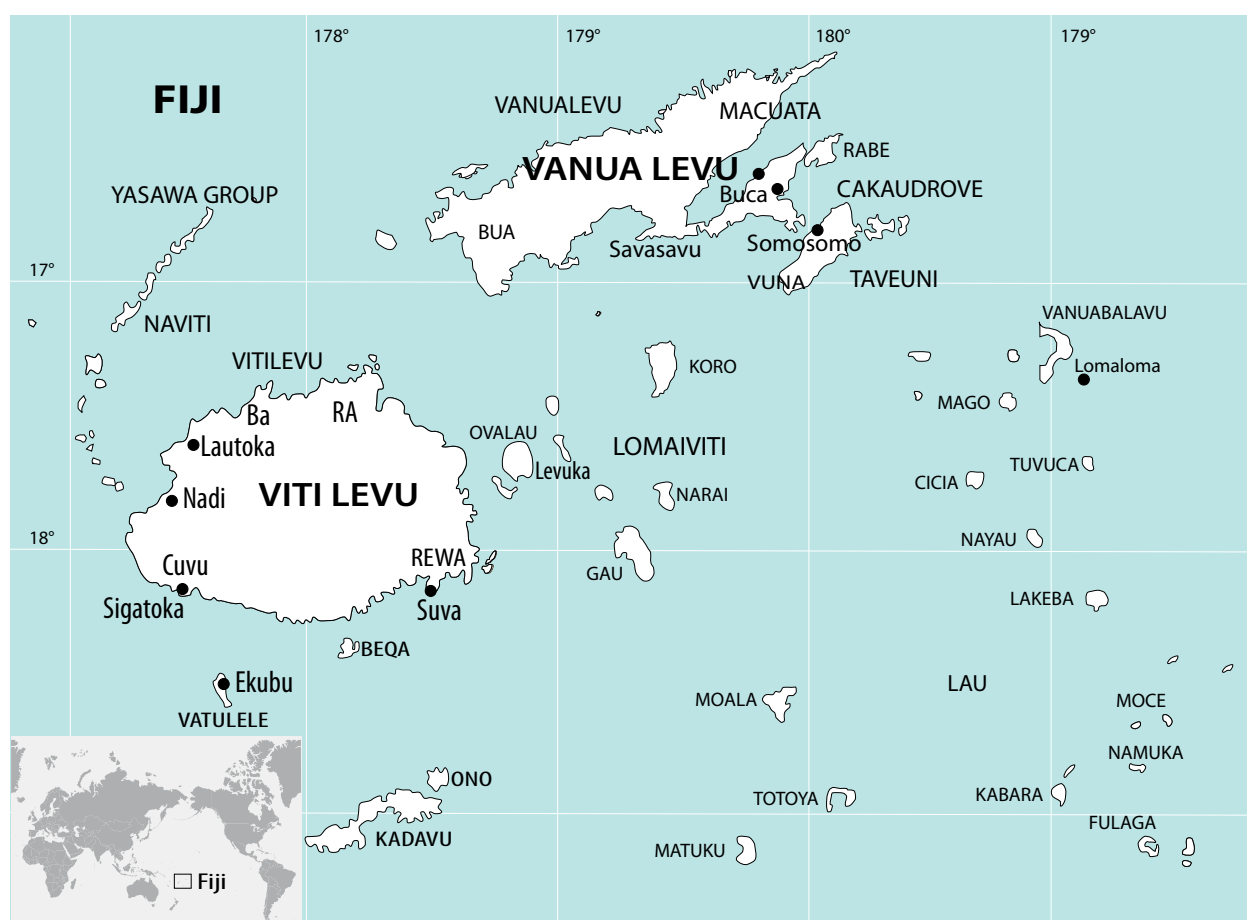


Figure 1. Map of the Republic of Fiji

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and development. Under the 2013 Constitution, there is recognition for equal rights to citizenship for both men and women, and equal status to spouses of male and female citizens. Previously, there were restrictions to non-citizen spouses of female citizens.

In this paper we briefly describe relevant issues on gender, culture, agriculture and fisheries in Fiji. We also describe Fiji's gender population and relevant statistics; land tenure, traditional social organization and customary marine tenure; and agriculture and fisheries issues relevant to gender.

Population and relevant statistics

The 2007 census gives an approximate idea of the make-up of Fiji's multi-racial population. The total population was estimated to be about 837,271 (www.statsfiji.gov.fj) with an annual growth of 0.8 per cent. Ethnic Fijians (*iTaukei*) accounted for 56 per cent (475,739) while Indo-Fijians, whose ancestors migrated from India in the late 19th century, accounted for 36 per cent (313,798) of the total population. The other 8 per cent (47,734) consisted of Rotumans, Pacific Islanders, Chinese, Europeans, New Zealanders, Australians and people of mixed ethnic origin (www.statsfiji.gov.fj).

In the 2007 census, the rural sector population numbered 412,425 and the urban sector 424,425. The population aged 15 years and over numbered 594,150. Out of these, 326,988 were economically active in the labour force and 267,162 were not economically active.

There has been a major demographic shift since 1987 because of political instability. In 1986, the Indo-Fijian population accounted for more than 50 per cent of the total population but, after 1987, there was large-scale emigration of the Indo-Fijian population because of military coups, political instability, ethnic conflict and lack of opportunities. The coups of 2000 and 2006 led to further political instability and further increase in emigration of both *iTaukei* and Indo-Fijians.

Gender and cultural issues

Indicators from 2004 showed that there are very little differences in the education levels of women and men. The enrolment rate for females in primary school was 94.6 per cent in 2000 compared to 94.9 per cent for males. The enrolment rate in secondary school was higher for females (74.0 per cent) than for males (67.7 per cent) (Republic of Fiji, 2004). The ratio of literate females to males 15–24 years old is similar (Republic of the Fiji Islands, 2004).

There are still very few women actively participating in decision making. All societies in Fiji are patriarchal and men are predominantly the politicians and the traditional leaders and take a leading role in leadership in the home and in the society.

Ethnic Fijian and Indo-Fijian societies are culturally different. The ethnic Fijian society is more homogeneous while the Indo-Fijian society is more diverse in culture as they come from different parts of India. However, there are

some noted differences in ethnic Fijian societies between the different traditional confederacies, eastern and western people and between the hill people and coastal people. Most ethnic Fijians are Christians and belong to the Methodist denomination. Other Christian denominations also exist for example the Catholics, Anglicans and Pentecostal denominations. Indo-Fijians mostly belong to several Hindu organisations but there is also a substantial Muslim population.

Traditional values influence gender relationships within the village where the leadership authority of chiefs and men has to be respected and women have to know their place, which is lower than men. For Indo-Fijians the gender relationships emphasise the male authority in decision-making at home.

Culturally, ethnic Fijian women are not restricted to the home and can be active in economic participation especially as teachers, nurses and as saleswomen in agriculture and fisheries. They are often seen selling at the markets in urban areas. There are some restrictions on Indo-Fijian women in rural areas, where women are restricted to working only in the home. Education and employment for girls have become more important in both communities in recent years.

Land tenure, traditional social organisation and customary marine tenure

Most land in Fiji is classified as “native land” and this accounts for 82 per cent of all land. The other 8 per cent is freehold, and 10 per cent is government owned. The “native land” is further subdivided into 36 per cent reserve land and 63 per cent unreserved land. Fijians control the reserve land directly (Ward 1995).

Land ownership follows a traditional Fijian social-political organisation as recorded by the British colonial administration (Nayacakalou 2001). At the highest level of the organisation is the *vanua* and this usually includes several villages in a district or districts. The *vanua* usually consists of several tribes or *yavusa* and these are found in one or several villages. Groups of *yavusa* form the *vanua* and these are headed by high-ranking chiefs (Ravuvu 1983). Customary marine tenure is usually associated with these larger social groups (Veitayaki 1998).

The primary land-owning unit is the clan or *mataqali* and there could be one or several found in one village. The *mataqali* is under the headship of the most senior male member. Groups of *mataqali* form the *yavusa* and the traditional heads are traditional chiefs in most of the islands throughout Fiji. The *mataqali* is then further sub-divided into the lowest level of socio-political organisation, *tokatoka* or sub-clan and is a kinship group based on patrilineal descent (Nayacakalou 2001). In some cases women may have user rights to use customary or native land but this is rare. Each male *mataqali* member is allocated plots to plant and to use for their own family's use. The size of the plots varies greatly and depends on the number of male members of the *mataqali*.

Although all iTaukei are registered as such in the *vola ni kawa bula* or Fijian registry not all have access to land and women often may also not have user rights. Indo-Fijians have been able to lease farming plots through the Agricultural Landlord and Tenants Act (ALTA) of 1976. About 46 per cent of native land is leased mostly for agriculture and other activities (Srisikandarajah 2003). The tourism industry is heavily reliant on leases and 50 per cent of resort facilities are on native land (Narayan and Prasad 2003). Mining and timber activities are also found on native land.

The two acts that give legal recognition to customary marine tenure or *qoliqoli* are the Fisheries Act of 1942 (Cap 158) and the State Lands Act (Cap 132). The Fisheries Act gave legal recognition for customary fishing rights to iTaukei kinship groups, usually the *yavusa*, while the State Lands Act recognises the ownership of the state. The customary fishing rights have been a contentious issue and the controversial *Qoliqoli Bill* (available at www.parliament.gov.fj) was the subject that divided the nation in 2006.

It was one of the reasons the military overthrew the Qarase government because Qarase wanted to legally recognise customary fishing rights and return ownership to Fijian social units registered in the Native Fisheries Commission. Despite, the political turmoil, nothing has changed much in terms of customary fishing rights governance because the traditional, cultural norms and social structures in Fijian villages are still intact.

Gender, agriculture and fisheries Issues

Women's involvement in agriculture at a subsistence level was higher than that of men (Chandra and Lewai 2005). In contrast, more men are likely to participate in commercial and semi-commercial agriculture than women. Although women contribute to post-harvest activities and marketing labour in most household level agricultural activities, they are rarely acknowledged in national statistics. On the other hand, Indo-Fijian men and women are more likely to be engaged in mixed cash and subsistence activities than ethnic Fijians (Chandra and Lewai 2005).

Studies have shown that women continue to contribute to routine agricultural activities and they engage in subsistence cultivation, marketing of farm produce, collecting shellfish, and selling shellfish (Schoeffel et al. 2005). Women are responsible for all household chores, including collecting firewood. Men assist the women by clearing and preparing the land and men grow commercial crops like papaw and tobacco.

Women of all ethnic origins are involved in marketing food crops in urban markets in the main cities and also from roadside stalls. Rural women grow their crops and sell their surplus in urban markets. Some women have turned entrepreneurs in urban markets by buying taro, cassava and vegetables from Chinese wholesale farmers and selling them at retail prices at urban markets and roadside stalls.

Ethnic Fijian women actively participate in subsistence fishing in coastal areas and many are now moving into male traditional fishing areas such as diving for *bêche-de-mer*.

Ethnic Fijian women are also the main distributors and marketers of seafood. Women also dominate invertebrate fishing like gleaning for shellfish and fishing for octopuses. Women also dominate post-harvest fishing activities and food processing.

Women contribute to subsistence fishing on a daily basis except when there is a communal fish drive in some parts of the country where the community is involved. Women use handlines, traps and bare hands and hardly use boats. Men are likely to use boats and nets or diving gear. Men are also required to contribute larger catches for ceremonial functions such as weddings and funerals or church obligations.

In small-scale commercial fishing, women contribute significantly to invertebrate collection like shellfish, seaweed, crabs and marketing them at the urban centres or at the roadside stalls. There is over-exploitation of near-shore marine resources and this has threatened the sustainability of household food security in many villages along the coast and in the islands. Fisheries resource management is an important issue that needs to be addressed in coastal villages in order to sustain household protein sources.

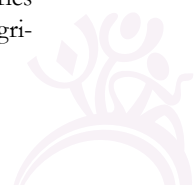
Since 1970, records of disasters have shown that people and livelihood are affected by disasters in varying degrees. The economic and social wellbeing, infrastructure and environment have been severely affected by natural disasters.

There were only two reported drought events occurring during this period, but the effects of these drought events was more severe than any other natural disaster and accounted for 45 per cent of all disaster-affected people since 1970 (Lal et al. 2009). Droughts affected people in the coast and also in the upland areas. The direct costs of natural disasters are also phenomenal and for disaster events occurring between 1970 and 2007, the direct costs were estimated to be about USD 532 million (Lal et al. 2009).

Disaster management in Fiji focuses on post-disaster response, recovery and rehabilitation rather than building a culture of prevention. Under the Natural Disaster Management Act 1998, the Natural Disaster Management Office is responsible for post national disaster response. It also runs an annual disaster awareness programme to promote community awareness on natural disasters and to help minimise negative impacts on livelihoods. The National Disaster Management Council (NDMC) is responsible for disaster management policies and it makes recommendations to government. Fiji Red Cross is also active in providing advice on disaster management policies, responses and operations in Fiji.

Conclusions

In summary, there are still very few women participating in major decision making in the different societies represented in Fiji. The land tenure, traditional social organization and customary marine tenure ownership are very much dominated by males. Men are actively involved in commercial and semi-commercial agriculture and fisheries while women are active in marketing and post harvest agriculture and fisheries activities.



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