

Translating gender equality from paper into practice: A new research agenda for coastal fisheries

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Sarah Lawless is a PhD candidate at the ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies at James Cook University in Queensland, Australia. Sarah has spent several years working in Melanesia for research agencies (WorldFish and James Cook University) and non-governmental organisations (Wildlife Conservation Society, World Wide Fund for Nature, and the Natural Resources Development Foundation) while working alongside national government ministries. Her past research explored the intersection of gender, natural resource management and livelihood development. Her current research investigates how global, regional and national governance actors translate gender equality as a governance principle into coastal fisheries policy and practice in the Pacific Islands region.

Project background

Commitments toward addressing gender inequality within and through coastal fisheries governance are unprecedented. The Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries¹ reflect these commitments, where gender equality features as a fundamental guiding principle (Kleiber et al. 2017; Song et al. 2019). In the Pacific Islands region, gender has become a more visible theme in coastal fisheries policies, strategies, and reporting and monitoring requirements. For example, 'A new song for coastal fisheries - pathways to change, A Regional Roadmap for Sustainable Pacific Fisheries' (Pacific Community 2015), and the coastal fisheries report card 2017 (Pacific Community 2017). In practice, virtually all major international conservation organisations (including those active in coastal fisheries) have revised their mission statements and programme objectives to highlight a greater commitment to both environmental *and* social outcomes (Mace 2014; Sikor et al. 2014). These social commitments emphasise gender equality as a central principle. As one example, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) recognises that 'gender equality and equity are matters of fundamental human rights and social justice, as well as the precondition for sustainable development and the achievements of IUCN's mission' (IUCN 2018).

Yet, despite the increasing commitments to address gender, more progress is needed to translate these commitments into action (Pacific Community 2016). The 2015 Millennium Development Goal tracking report indicates that over the past 15 years, the Pacific Islands region has not demonstrated any substantial improvement towards reducing issues of gender inequality (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2015). The region has the highest rates of violence against women globally, and the lowest representation of women in national parliaments. While preliminary attempts have sought to

understand the structural barriers² to gender integration within Pacific Islands governments (including directly within ministries responsible for fisheries in some countries) (Pacific Community 2016, 2018), more work is required to illuminate and overcome the conditions hindering the implementation of gender equality commitments.

Research objectives

I seek to understand the extent to which global and regional written gender commitments translate into action at various scales of Pacific Island governance. I reflect critically upon the current coastal fisheries development paradigm in the Pacific and ask several questions: How has gender equality, as a principle, been manifested in regional and national written commitments? How has gender been constructed (i.e. defined and expressed)? What actions do coastal fisheries governance actors take to address gender inequality, and to what extent do they align with 'gender in development' best practice? How do governance actors respond to increasing demands to integrate gender into their coastal fisheries work? What are future strategies the coastal fisheries sector could employ to encourage more meaningful integration of gender into policy and practice?

To answer these questions, I am conducting empirical research in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. I selected these countries because coastal fisheries in these countries are significant for local economies, nutrition, food security, and have cultural importance (Gillett 2016; Hoegh-Guldberg and Ridgeway 2016). These countries also have a strong presence of coastal fisheries actors (i.e. donors, United Nations agencies, international and local non-governmental organisations, regional governance agencies, national government ministries, independent experts and academic institutions), and receive varying levels of development investment toward the management

¹ <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=Voluntary+Guidelines+for+Securing+Sustainable+Small-Scale+Fisheries+>

² Structural barriers in this case include legal and policy frameworks, compliance mechanisms, organisational practices or cultures, and technical capacities.



of coastal fisheries. I use document review and participant observation methods to explore how global, regional and national policy-makers define and express gender in policies and strategies, organisational project documents, as well as coastal fisheries meetings, workshops and conferences. I combine these data with qualitative key informant interviews with more than 70 coastal fisheries and/or gender experts across over 30 organisations working at both regional and national scales. I conduct a large proportion of this data collection in partnership with Dr Sangeeta Mangubhai from the Wildlife Conservation Society in Fiji.

Preliminary findings

Approaches to gender

Preliminary findings suggest that many interventions (both governmental and non-governmental) seek to explicitly target women when using approaches to integrate gender in coastal fisheries. These approaches include community engagement and facilitation, development of policies and strategies, and organisational practice. These interventions tend to reflect a 'women in development' approach where solutions focus on working with women and treating inequalities as 'women's issues'. In terms of best practice, this approach was critiqued during the 1980s due to the preoccupation with women's economic progress (resulting in domestic and reproductive labour burdens), and neglected to consider men and power relations between men and women (Rathgeber 1990). In contrast, a 'gender and development' approach is concerned with how gender is socially constructed, including the specific roles, responsibilities and expectations assigned to women and men. This approach questions the social, economic and political structures underpinning gender inequalities (Rathgeber 1990).

Responses to gender

In examining data from key informant interviews I find that gender equality as a principle is resisted, rhetorically adopted, or contested by the majority of coastal fisheries actors. At the regional scale, fisheries actors often pursue gender equality as a means of increasing their organisational legitimacy. In contrast, at the national scale, the willingness to consider gender is high, but the capability and capacity of fisheries actors to do so is limited. Gender as a construct is also debated by coastal fisheries actors due to its ambiguity, intangibility and lack of context-specific framing. I argue that contestation of this principle presents an opportunity for governance actors to negotiate context specific meanings around gender within their organisations and interventions leading to more tangible actions and outcomes.

Research contribution

The outcomes of this research will inform relevant and localised strategies to meaningfully integrate gender considerations in coastal fisheries in the Pacific. Specifically, to:

- determine the extent to which external ideals toward addressing gender inequality, including donor-driven requirements and investments, align with Pacific priorities and/or interests in coastal fisheries; and
- work alongside regional governance actors and interested staff from the ministries responsible for fisheries to inform localised and culturally sensitive regional, national gender best practice. This will involve taking into account the experiences and perceptions of governance actors working on gender, and understanding the constraints of current approaches.

This research is being conducted in partnership with several scholars and development practitioners, including Sangeeta Mangubhai (Wildlife Conservation Society-Fiji), Chelcia Gomez (WorldFish, Solomon Islands), Aliti Vunisea (independent consultant, Fiji) and Danika Kleiber (WorldFish and James Cook University). This PhD research is under the supervision of Associate Professor Tiffany Morrison (James Cook University), Dr Philippa Cohen (WorldFish), Dr Andrew Song (WorldFish and James Cook University) and Dr Anne Stephens (James Cook University).

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