

## Beyond gender-blind livelihoods: Considerations for coastal livelihood initiatives

Sarah Lawless<sup>1,2</sup>,  
Philippa Cohen<sup>1,3</sup>,  
Faye Siota<sup>2</sup>,  
Grace Orirana<sup>2</sup>,  
Kate Doyle<sup>4</sup> and  
Cynthia McDougall<sup>3</sup>

Sustainable and improved livelihoods are often entry points to enhance human well-being and the management of natural resources (Allison and Ellis 2001; Sulu et al. 2015). Yet research shows that many of these livelihood initiatives still proceed as “gender blind” or “gender reinforcing” (e.g. Kleiber et al. 2019a; Lawless et al. 2017; Stacey et al. 2019). A gender-blind initiative fails to account for the norms (i.e. roles, rights and responsibilities of women and men) and relations (i.e. the power dynamics among and between women and men) influencing how individuals experience opportunities and outcomes differently (Kleiber et al. 2019a). A gender-reinforcing (or gender-exploitative) initiative is one that exploits norms and relations to achieve or accelerate other outcomes, and in doing so, perpetuates or exacerbates existing inequalities (Kleiber et al. 2019a; Lawless et al. 2017). Such initiatives may focus on just men, or just women, without considering gender differences. Consequently, these (often well-intentioned) initiatives may serve to reinforce or amplify existing gender inequalities (Elmhirst and Resurrección 2009; Nightingale 2006). Our recent publication in the journal of *Maritime Studies* (Lawless et al. 2019) sought to bring foundational information to coastal livelihood initiatives in Solomon Islands to inform gender-sensitive approaches. In this article, we provide a summary of four key gender considerations that emerged from this research.

In order for initiatives to facilitate improved livelihood opportunities, we argue it is important to understand the agency of different individuals. A person with agency “is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important” (Sen 1985, p. 203). Yet the conditions influencing a person’s agency are gendered. Agency differs among and between women and men depending on the sets of choices available to them and their different capacities to exercise those choices (Boudet et al. 2013). In rural settings, opportunity structures, such as access to fisheries extension services, are more accessible to men, elevating them into positions where they are more able to access, control and benefit from natural resources (i.e. fish,



Fish drawing ©Philippa Cohen

land and produce) and productive assets (i.e. income, equipment and technology) than women (Meinzen-Dick et al. 2014). Studies in rural contexts around the world have shown that men are more able to make claims on natural resources and determine the direction of decisions related to resource use and assets within households and communities (Boudet et al. 2013; Meinzen-Dick et al. 2014). In the Pacific, research shows that women can be adversely affected by changes to marine resource rules and use if not sufficiently consulted (Vunisea 2008). Other differences in identity such as age, ethnicity, religion and disability status (referred to as “intersectionality”) affect the opportunities people have and can exacerbate the effects of gender (World Bank 2013).

Using a series of focus group discussions (FGD) adapted from an established methodology called GENNOVATE,<sup>5</sup> we sought to capture the gender-differentiated experiences of women, men and youth. The FGDs included both qualitative and quantitative techniques. FGDs were held with a total of 232 women, men and youth across three coastal communities in Solomon Islands. Discussions were conducted separately with adult women ( $n = 92$ ), adult men ( $n = 79$ ), female youth ( $n = 16$ ) and male youth ( $n = 45$ ). The communities we selected were chosen because they (a) had a high dependence on coastal and/or terrestrial resources, (b) experienced resource depletion associated with fisheries and/or agriculture, and (c) had expressed an interest in receiving support to improve livelihood opportunities and the improved management of their natural resources.

<sup>1</sup> ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies, James Cook University, Australia. Corresponding author: sarah.lawless@my.jcu.edu.au

<sup>2</sup> WorldFish, Honiara, Solomon Islands.

<sup>3</sup> WorldFish, Penang, Malaysia.

<sup>4</sup> Promundo, Washington, United States.

<sup>5</sup> A comparative global research initiative examining gender norms and agency in natural resource management (<https://gennovate.org/>).



Women with clams. ©Meshach Sulu



Woman and garden. ©Wade Fairley



Selling cooked reef fish at the market. ©Filip Milovac

## Results: Gender implications for agency in coastal communities

We found men had access to a greater set of livelihood choices than women. Men's livelihood activities included building and selling hand-carved dugout canoes, gardening, cutting and selling firewood, building houses for informal salaries, formal paid employment, and fishing for both food and income. In contrast, women were engaged in domestic duties (i.e. child and family care, housework, food preparation) and had limited access to livelihood opportunities: "some of us women only have our garden [small agricultural plots] for our livelihoods". These results are not unusual; in fact, external organisations often recognise women's more limited livelihood opportunities and seek to expand their livelihood portfolios. Yet we also find livelihood diversification (whether community initiated or as a deliberate strategy facilitated by external agencies) may simultaneously increase women's responsibilities and time pressures. One woman reported, "Life now is hard ... [in the past] men had their own work, and women had their own work. Nowadays women's work is heavy ... Before, carrying water and hoeing the garden only the men did. But now, the women are doing this work". Female respondents also reported that being involved in an externally initiated savings club meant that they had less time to maintain their domestic roles. These results are consistent with other findings from Solomon Islands that suggest women's labour demands tend to escalate as livelihood activities diversify (Cohen et al. 2016; Pollard, 2000).

Rigid norms related to divisions in labour meant women were expected to be primarily responsible for domestic and food production roles, thus limiting their physical mobility to leave the household or community. Some female and male respondents suggested women should not travel far (i.e. to attend markets) because in her absence a husband would have to undertake the work of his wife (i.e. domestic labour). An adult male respondent reported that "there is no reason for a woman to go out marketing, she is supposed to be staying at home with the kids". Yet we found that such divisions in male and female labour were more fluid in instances where community members perceived there to be benefits for the household. For example, in one of the communities, a women's savings club had facilitated increased income and food for households. Evidence of these benefits meant men became more prepared to undertake women's work and were more supportive of women attending markets. Referring to this initiative, one adult man reported, "today women can instruct their husbands to clean the house when they are away. This is not something that was practised before".

We found that women were less likely than men to trial new livelihoods because they felt more vulnerable to risks of failure. Across the three communities, 91% of women stated they were primarily responsible for providing food from gardening and consequently held greater concerns about limited or delayed rewards in trialling new livelihood practices (particularly those introduced by external organisations). This trend of risk aversion among women is seen in other rural settings, due to women's greater domestic responsibilities, leaving women with less time and physical space to innovate and experiment (Fothergill 1996). These findings emphasise the need for externally initiated livelihood

initiatives to address perceptions of risks, particularly among women, rather than the more common approaches that only seek to fill technical or knowledge gaps. Initiatives that can assist to carry the cost of innovation, with specific attention to the constraints upon women, are more likely to bring improved outcomes for individuals, as they are more able to access and participate in initiatives (Cohen et al. 2016).

Women's and men's perceptions of their agency to make decisions was dependent on what the decision related to. Men primarily discussed community-level decisions (i.e. in relation to management of coastal resources, the Church and schools), whereas most women discussed decision-making at the household level (i.e. in relation to crop farming, food consumption and children). We found men were more able than women to make decisions within communal domains (i.e. decisions related to coastal and terrestrial resources), as demonstrated by their greater involvement in local community governance structures than women. However, explicit efforts of external organisations to work with women increased their self-efficacy and confidence to contribute to communal decisions. One woman explained, "when organizations come into our community we see the light. Like when you [external organization] come, you educate us and open our minds. That's why we know we have the right to make decisions and we feel free to speak out. Before our mouths were zipped. We had good ideas, but we never voiced them. If we voiced our ideas, no one would follow them". These findings (along with Pollard 2000) question the dominant narrative in Solomon Islands that women's participation in decision-making is subordinate to men's. Women viewed themselves as central within their households, which can translate into their perceived ability to act on behalf of what they value and have reason to value (consistent with the definition of agency we use). Consequently, it is important that livelihood initiatives acknowledge that measures of agency can vary depending on the particular settings in which decisions are made (i.e. within households or communities), and that individuals may value particular issues or decisions differently (i.e. depending on the different resources central to individual livelihoods).

## Conclusion: Gender considerations for coastal livelihood initiatives

Whether livelihood initiatives intentionally acknowledge and engage with gender or not, they will affect women and men in ways that may reinforce or, alternatively, shift existing gender expectations and relationships, thus having implications for the agency of different individuals (Elmhirst and Resurrección 2009; Nightingale 2006). Consequently, considering gender is much more than a collection of sex-disaggregated data on livelihood roles. Gender considerations require attention to gender norms and relations shaping the different opportunities and experiences of women, men and youth. Our study offers four key considerations for livelihood initiatives to ensure they enhance, rather than reinforce, existing disparities between and among women and men. First, initiatives need to consider whether livelihood diversification may unintentionally intensify women's workloads and time burdens. This may require understanding existing roles and aspirations and being aware of both the intended and unintended impacts that may affect women and men (i.e. through good monitoring

and evaluating procedures, and adjustment of practices as needed). Second, livelihood initiatives have the potential to enable women and men to depart from entrenched gender roles in instances where people can see compelling benefits (often by examples of success) to the household (e.g. Locke et al. 2017). Third, initiatives that can help carry the cost of innovation, and thereby lower the risk inherent in experimentation particularly for women, may enhance opportunities to access, participate in, and improve livelihood outcomes through innovation. Finally, livelihood initiatives need to acknowledge that measures of agency are dependent on different decision-making contexts, which shape what an individual values and has reason to value. This is important in terms of natural resource use, as women, men and youth may participate and use resources differently, and may value and respond to changes to these resources in different ways. Drawing on gender-inclusive and reflexive facilitation practices (e.g. Kleiber et al. 2019b) may help to understand these different perceptions and values, mitigate any potential consequences, and contribute to the design and delivery of gender-sensitive livelihood initiatives.

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