

Shining a light on Fijian women fishers' role in providing food and income for their households

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Abstract

Women play crucial roles in small-scale fisheries (SSF), providing food and income for their households. However, their contributions are often overlooked and/or under-valued. We carried out focus group discussions and household surveys to explore the role of indigenous Fijian (iTaukei) women in SSF. Our results showed that although some traditional roles of women fishers still apply, such as using simple fishing gear, many women are also using boats to fish habitats farther from the village. Women fishers' primary motivation for fishing was to provide food for their households, demonstrating their key role in food security. Many women also sold some of their catch, although other livelihoods such as agriculture and handicrafts provided an additional source of income. This article highlights key results from our open access scientific paper published in the journal *Ocean and Coastal Management*.²

Key findings

The women fishers harvested a large diversity of species for both food and income. Overall, they harvested a minimum of 104 species of invertebrates and seaweed (99 for food and income, 47 for food only and 5 for only income), and caught a minimum of 160 species of fish (91 only for subsistence, 67 for food and income and one species only for income). The majority of women fished for multiple reasons, including subsistence, cultural events, income and as a social activity.

Compared with men, more of their catch was used for subsistence and less for income. Women fished a range of habitats from inland rivers to the open ocean, but the soft bottom and coral reef habitats were fished by the highest numbers of women. Fishing was usually done less than an hour from their village, and fishing time was most often two to three hours. Finally, a range of transportation modes were used by the women fishers to access their fishing sites; on foot and boats without motors were the most common.

Forty-three per cent of women sold at least some of their catch for income, but only 18% sold at a municipal market. Although the women fishers reported a range of barriers in selling their catch, the most common ones, such as access to a market, no available market, and transportation difficulties were related to selling at municipal markets. Additionally, only 7% of the women carried out any value-adding (mainly seafood packs with fish), suggesting a training opportunity.

The women fishers made an important contribution to household food security, catching the majority of both fresh fish and invertebrates consumed. Almost all of their households had eaten fresh fish during the past week, up to seven times or once a day on average. In terms of other livelihoods besides fishing for food, farming was the next most common and provided a backup food source for many of the women's households. However, in terms of importance, women viewed fishing and handicrafts as their most important livelihoods; and handicrafts and selling their fisheries catch were the "most stable" and "brought in the most money".

For a full copy of the paper:

Thomas A., Mangubhai S., Fox M., Meo S., Miller K., Naisilisili W., Veitayaki J. and Waqairatu S. 2021. Why they must be counted: Significant contributions of Fijian women fishers to food security and livelihoods. *Ocean & Coastal Management*, 205:105571. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0964569121000569>

Fisherwoman on Koro Island in Fiji. © VCreative



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² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0964569121000569>