

Twenty-five issues of the Women in Fisheries Information Bulletin: The story within the story of 25 years of women in fisheries at SPC

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Congratulations to the Secretariat of the Pacific Community's Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems (FAME) Division, and all the editors, translators, contributors, producers and donors, on the 25th issue of SPC's *Women in Fisheries Information Bulletin* (WIF). This is a worthy milestone and one enjoyed by relatively few publications, including only some of the sibling SPC Information Bulletins (Table 1).

The milestone caused me to reflect on how themes such as women in fisheries can become part of the fabric of institutions even when they are not major core themes, as in the case of coastal and oceanic fisheries and aquaculture with their own dedicated programmes. I conclude that the more marginal themes — marginal in a programme sense, if not in potential importance — persist because of the tenacious effort of individuals and because of the genuine importance of the theme. This is the first and more immediate "story" of the title. To arrive at my conclusion, I briefly trace the history of WIF, and make some observations on how women's involvement is handled in some other key SPC Information Bulletins.

However, in putting together the story of 25 issues of WIF, I stumbled on a larger and longer story

— that of the topic of women in fisheries at SPC over the last 25 years. After telling something of the story of WIF, therefore, I will share a short version of the longer story. At times in its progress, the longer story seems like "one step forward and two steps back." When "two steps back" have occurred, WIF and other Information Bulletins became the "one step" that held the line.

Origins of WIF

WIF was not the first SPC Information Bulletin — the *Beche-de-Mer Information Bulletin* (BDM) has that distinction — nor the most prolific. Again, BDM wins, but WIF is one of the longer lasting and one of only three that persist to the present day. The other current Information Bulletins are BDM and *Traditional Marine Resources Management and Knowledge* (TRAD for short). The *Fisheries Education and Training Information Bulletin*, though relatively short-lived, also produced quite a few issues and figures in this story.

In 1996, the 26th Regional Technical Meeting on Fisheries (RTMF) heard that SPC had created a separate Women's Fisheries Development Section, elevating the previous work from project status. This

Table 1. SPC Information Bulletins.

Information Bulletin	Period	No. of issues
Beche-de-Mer	1990–present	34
Ciguatera	1991–1993	3
Fish Aggregating Device	1996–1998	3
Fisheries Education and Training	1993–2007	26
Live Reef Fish	1996–2011	20
Pearl Oyster	1990–2011	19
Sea Safety	2005–2011	6
Traditional Marine Resource Management and Knowledge	1992–present	33
Trochus	1992–2010	15
Women in Fisheries	1997–present	24

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drew good support from many delegates but concern from a few. One feared it would draw scarce resources from other fisheries work and another that it would overlap with, or be redundant to, work being done at the University of the South Pacific. Funding of the new section was already in jeopardy and the RTMF recommended (Recommendation 9) that “the Secretariat pursue every avenue to secure funding for the continuation of the section.”

More significantly, the discussion on the proposed work of the Fisheries Information Section (which still produces WIF to this day) led to the recommendation to create a Special Interest Group (SIG) Bulletin on Women in Fisheries. The RTMF record (SPC 1996a) credits Ursula Kolkola, the delegate from Papua New Guinea and a pioneering woman senior fisheries officer in the region, with speaking first to support the SIG. The 26th RTMF report on SPC Coastal Fisheries Programme Activities also gave a short account of the struggle since 1991 to establish work on women in fisheries at SPC that went beyond simple project activities, although these definitely gave the theme a toehold (SPC 1996b). The struggle is described further below. Information Paper 11 (SPC 1996c) expanded on the reasons for giving more attention to women’s roles and contributions in fisheries. It did not, however, explicitly mention the issues of equal rights for women, as might have been expected so soon after the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action that sought to “advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of all humanity.”

Recommendation No. 10 (26th RTMF): *The Meeting recognised the significant involvement of women in fisheries activities. In order to facilitate the role of women in fisheries in the region through the exchange of ideas, knowledge and experience, the Meeting recommended that a Special Interest Group Bulletin on Women in Fisheries be set up under the SPC Fisheries Information Section. The Bulletin would serve as an information and communication network outlining the activities of interest and concern to women in the fisheries sector.*

As Aliti Vunisea, the first Coordinator of the SIG and editor of WIF (see Table 2 for full list), said in introducing the first WIF (October 1997): “... SIG was established as a result of Recommendation No.

10 of the 26th Regional Technical Meeting on Fisheries (RTMF) held at SPC headquarters in Noumea from 5 to 9 August 1996.”

And so WIF was launched.

WIF has been fortunate to have financial support from the governments of Australia, France and New Zealand, enabling continual production. In contrast, SPC’s own work on women in fisheries has only received sporadic financial and other resources. At times, including the present, the WIF coordinators, editors and Aymeric Desurmont from SPC’s Fisheries Information Section have had a key role in keeping the women in fisheries theme alive at SPC.

While WIF is the Information Bulletin for a Special Interest Group, it is also affected directly and indirectly by what is happening in SPC’s own programmes, for example, in the amount of material available to WIF. In the 18 years since its launch, WIF has enjoyed relatively rich years and some thin ones. In each of the good years (eight, counting this year), two issues were produced; in the lean (two years only), none; and in the other years (seven), one issue came out. The richer years were often associated with SPC having relevant projects and activities underway. Particularly, from 1998 to 2003, the Women’s Fisheries Development Section and then the Community Fisheries Section were very active in doing country assessments, delivering training programmes and developing manuals. From 2007 to 2009, women in fisheries assessment results were reported in WIF from the PROCFish (Pacific Regional Oceanic and Coastal Fisheries Development Programme) and SciCOFish (Scientific Support for the Management of Coastal and Oceanic Fisheries in the Pacific Islands Region) projects. Lean years may now be expected as FAME’s strategic plan for 2013–2016 refers to women/gender as “cross-cutting” issues but does not specify any related objectives and targets.

So with the waxing and waning of resources, which I discuss further below, and despite the successful efforts to maintain WIF, “women in fisheries” still struggles in the Pacific. This is despite the Pacific being the region of the world with probably the richest involvement of women in coastal fisheries (Pinca et al. 2010; Williams 2010; Kleiber et al. 2014) and the important but little documented

Table 2. Coordinators and editors of the *WIF Information Bulletin*.

Coordinators and editors of WIF	Years	Issues
Aliti Vunisea, University of the South Pacific	1997–1998	01–03
Lyn Lambeth, SPC	1999–2001	04–09
Kim Des Rochers, SPC	2002–2003	10–13
Aliti Vunisea, SPC	2004–2007	14–16
Veikila Vuki, University of Guam and Oceania Environment Consultants	2007–present	17–25

participation of women in industrial oceanic fisheries supply chains (Williams 2014).

If we look a little more broadly than the key programme documents and reports of SPC's fisheries and aquaculture programmes, we find in the other two remaining SPC Information Bulletins (*Beche-de-mer* and *Traditional Marine Resources Management and Knowledge*), and in the most recent selection (1999 to 2007) of the Training and Education Information Bulletin, evidence of an underlying interest in the women in fisheries theme.

Traditional Marine Resource Management and Knowledge Information Bulletin (TRAD)

Two thirds of the issues of TRAD (22 of 33) contained substantive articles of relevance to women in fisheries. This would be expected from the nature of TRAD, but one may also ask why there were not more, and why in several cases the interest in women's roles focused on what was *tapu* for women rather than on women's agency. Nevertheless, TRAD contained many articles relevant to women in fisheries. Articles on research methods applicable to collecting gendered information were published in issues 2, 10, 16. Articles on fisheries in Pacific Island countries related to northern Australia (1), Cook Islands (8), Federated States of Micronesia (4, 6), Fiji (3, 5, 8, 29), Marshall Islands (21), Samoa (11), Solomon Islands (1, 7, 8, 12, 14, 16, 19), Tokelau (11), Tonga (13, 24), Tuvalu (7) and Vanuatu (20, 24, 32). Other countries were mentioned briefly in more regional articles. In addition, women were taken into account in articles on Malthusian overfishing (3), foraging strategies (9), turtle taboos (15), and marine protected areas, food security, and the Millennium Development Goals (17, 24).

Beche-de-Mer Information Bulletin (BDM)

Women have long played a role in traditional inshore fishing for and processing of holothurians (sea cucumber or beche-de-mer). BDM, SPC's longest running fisheries Information Bulletin, included substantive mentions of women's roles in sea cucumber collection, processing, marketing and mariculture in about a quarter of its issues (8 of 34). In some other issues, bibliographies included material on women. The fisheries involving women (with Information Bulletin number in brackets) were in: Indonesia — Sulawesi (10) and Pualu Misa (34); Philippines and Pacific — an overview of *Stichopus* use (13); Madagascar (21, 29); Oman (25, 30); and Malaysia/Sabah (32).

Fisheries Training and Education Information Bulletin (issues 12–26 only)

In 1999, this Information Bulletin reported on sea-food quality training by SPC's women's training

programme at the New Zealand School of Fisheries, Nelson (12). Not surprisingly, when a training course for marine engineers was mooted, the SPC Women in Fisheries network and its Pacific Women's Bureau had to be called in, in an effort to source women candidates (21).

Vanuatu featured in two of the issues. In one (13), a training needs assessment for Vanuatu highlighted the need for training for women in fish processing. In the second (22), a report on a Vanuatu rural fishing training programme run by the Vanuatu Maritime College (VMC) contained the "delicious" photo caption: "Capt. Ken Barnett, head of VMC, cuts a cake as instructor Alickson Aru and students watch. The cake was made by the women of Tutuba, and was designed to remind VMC that women should attend the next course held there."

In addition to specific training programs targeting women, they obviously also entered mainstream training programmes. For example, by 2002, the SPC National Fisheries Officers training course, which had been running for 20 years, was seeing an increasing number of women officers enrolling in this intensive course (18). When course participants visited New Zealand after the 2003 fourth regional training course for managers of medium-to-large size fisheries enterprises, Beverly Levi from Samoa remarked on the number of women in New Zealand who were employed at sea (23).

Conclusions on the WIF story

The origins and progress of the WIF Information Bulletin show it has been supported by SPC and donors despite an apparently patchy record of relevant activities in SPC's fisheries programmes. The dedication of all those who produce it should be saluted. But although the occasion of the 25th issue caused me to look at WIF itself, some of my observations prompted me to go further and look into the larger and longer story of women in fisheries at SPC.

The story of 25 years of women in fisheries at SPC (1989–2014)

In delving into the SPC Fisheries Digital Library to learn more about the story of how the WIF Information Bulletin came about, I started to find pieces of the bigger story, beyond the timeframe of its 25 issues. By coincidence, the bigger story started around 1989 and covered about 25 years, not just the period of WIF (1997 to the present).

From SPC's excellent Fisheries Digital Library,² I found that SPC fisheries programmes (including aquaculture) had a varied record of including women and gender topics. From the start of the Regional

² All errors or misinterpretations of the archive material are the responsibility of the author.

Technical Meeting on Fisheries (RTMF) records (1952) until 1989, and apart from one external RTMF information paper on women in fisheries (Lal and Slatter 1982), the subject of women in fisheries was simply not mentioned. It seemed 1989 was a good year from which to start as for the first time, the word “women” began appearing more often in SPC high-level reports, especially those of the RTMF meetings and the more recent Heads of Fisheries (HoF) meetings.

From 1989 to 1990, women in fisheries activities were reported under the Fish Handling and Processing Project (FHPP) (RTMF 22, 1990 reports). The Fish Handling and Processing Officer, Steve Roberts, recommended a “Women in Fisheries Programme”, noting that SPC’s Pacific Women’s Resource Bureau and the Fish Handling and Processing Project were already undertaking women’s fisheries work.

Recommendation No. 5: *Following discussion which emphasised the growing interest region-wide in activities which support the needs of women from coastal fishing communities, the meeting recommended that a Women in Fisheries Programme be implemented as proposed and that a position of Women’s Fisheries Programme Officer be created.*

In May 1991, a Women’s Fisheries Development Sub-Project (with Canadian Government funds) under the FHPP started, with Ms Shirley Steele as Women’s Fisheries Programme Officer. Also in 1991, at the 23rd RTMF, an information paper was presented on women in Papua New Guinea fisheries (Wararu 1991).

By the time of the 24th RTMF (August 1992), the position of Women’s Fisheries Programme Officer was vacant and unlikely to be refilled due to budget constraints. The word “women” did not appear in the RTMF report, although support for women’s post-harvest activities continued according to programme work reports.

At the 25th RTMF (March 1994), women in fisheries activities at SPC remained stalled owing to lack of staff and despite strong support for the activities from three countries (Palau, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu).

Recommendation No. 7: *The meeting re-stated the importance of the SPC Women’s Fisheries Development Project, which had provided valuable support to a number of national level women in fisheries initiatives. The Meeting recommended that the Secretariat take all possible action to reinstate Canadian funding support for this important project, or, failing this, attempt to identify an alternative source of funding for it.*

By the time of the 26th and last RTMF in August 1996, the Women’s Fisheries Development Project had been reinstated and had moved from being a

sub-project of the Fish Handling and Processing project to the newly established Women’s Fisheries Development Section (WFDS). In 1995, Patricia Tuara was recruited as the Women’s Fisheries Development Officer. “The main objectives of the WFDS are to promote the increased involvement of women from coastal fishing communities in regional and national fisheries development activities; and enhance income-earning opportunities for women...” The work was funded by the Government of Canada and project funds were also sourced from the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

In 1998, the Women’s Fisheries Development Section became the Community Fisheries Section. Patricia Tuara headed the section as Adviser and Lyn Lambeth was appointed as an Officer with Marie Therese Bui as a Project Assistant. From 1997, the section was funded by the Governments of Australia and New Zealand. From 1996 to 1999, the section was active in national assessments, national and regional training programmes and in developing training manuals (Community Fisheries Section 1999) focusing on women but also turning to broader gender-based work, including in the tuna industry. In August 1999 at the 1st Heads of Fisheries meeting, most delegates were highly supportive of the section’s work, though some thought it was attempting to do too much without perhaps sufficient skills, and one perceived a bias towards women’s interests.

The dissenting views reflected that, in the region, opinions on the relevance of women in fisheries were in flux. The terminology and concepts that were acceptable to Pacific Island countries and regional fisheries agencies were debated. Apparently women-only projects sometimes caused negative reactions. In the Global Women in Fisheries Symposium (2001), Lyn Lambeth and colleagues discussed alternatives such as inclusive or “cross-cutting” positions or agencies that would be concerned with “equal opportunity and involvement of men and women in development and management activities, rather than the specific promotion of women’s involvement” (Lambeth et al. 2002). This explains the change of name of the SPC section relevant to women in fisheries.

The report of the Community Fisheries Section at the 2nd Heads of Fisheries meeting in 2001 provided a history of the development of the section and its work, with a new emphasis on community-based fisheries management, albeit with a focus on women. The meeting did not appear to discuss women’s or community fisheries issues, perhaps indicating that the area was already falling off the agenda.

By the 3rd Heads of Fisheries meeting in 2003, the Community Fisheries Section had become the Coastal Fisheries Management Section to broaden the focus further to other aspects of

fisheries management. The only mention of the word “women” in the 3rd Heads of Fisheries meeting outputs summary was the following: “The lack of specific mention of gender, or women in fisheries, in the objectives of the Coastal Fisheries Programme Strategic Plan was noted by the meeting. Although gender is included at the fundamental cross-cutting level of ‘basic principles and specific policies’ in the Annex to the plan, the meeting felt that the issue should also be expressed as a specific strategy or objective at a high level within the plan the next time that this ‘living document’ is published.”

The journey away from a women’s focus was now almost complete, but was it? By the time of the meeting, Aliti Vunisea (the first editor of WIF) had joined SPC as the Coastal Fisheries Management Officer and Mecki Kronen as Community Fisheries Scientist. They both worked on PROCFish (2002–2009), funded by the European Union and Pacific partners (Pinca et al. 2010), which collected and analysed a large volume of sex-disaggregated coastal fishing data (Pinca et al. 2010). From 2008 to 2010, PROCFish started producing the results of its in-depth country coastal fisheries assessments, including sex-disaggregated data for fishing, culminating in 2012 with its final synthesis report. The report (Pinca et al. 2010) included important and new gender-specific results that even now have not been given enough recognition. For example, the study found that in Pacific countries, finfisheries for commercial purposes are mainly the domain of men, with women catching finfish mainly for home consumption, except in parts of Melanesia where women also market their finfish. For most types of invertebrates, however, women and men spend about the same amount of time fishing and catch about the same amount of product. The analyses were led by Mecki Kronen and Aliti Vunisea, yet overall, the reports often seemed reluctant to highlight the results for gender or to draw policy-relevant conclusions for gendered action.

Meanwhile, at the 4th, 5th, and 6th Heads of Fisheries meetings (2004, 2006 and 2009, respectively), women and gender issues were no longer prominent in SPC’s fisheries work, except for a rather unusual paper on “Social and gender considerations of the tuna industry in Pacific Island countries (PICs)” presented at the 5th meeting.

At the 2009 meeting, the staffing of all SPC fisheries programmes was reported to be about one-third female, but the data were not disaggregated by type and level of employee. In 2009, the European Union funded SciCOFish project was just about to start. One component of the project involved case studies on employment of women and men in fisheries and environmental research and management in Solomon Islands, Tonga and Marshall Islands. The results showed that women made up only 18% of

the total number of staff, or 25% if observers were taken out of the calculations (Tuara and Passfield 2011). However, women made up more than 60% of administrative and clerical staff.

The 7th (2011) and 8th (2013) Heads of Fisheries meetings, and an informal meeting in 2012, did not address any women/gender in fisheries issues. The WIF Information Bulletin seems to be the only work on women in fisheries now done by SPC.

Conclusions on the larger story of women in fisheries at SPC

The results of studying key SPC documents show that from 1989 to the present, a period of 25 years, women’s interests in fisheries and aquaculture have only been intermittently addressed by SPC’s fisheries programmes. Women in fisheries professional positions were filled in 1991 (one year only) and from 1995 to 2001, during which time women’s positions became community fisheries positions and then were effectively absorbed into more general coastal fisheries work. Project work, especially PROCFish and a small element of SciCOFish, staffed by competent women in fisheries researchers, included very valuable gender studies, even in projects that seemed reluctant to show that they were addressing gender. Indeed, in the case of PROCFish, the outcomes of the project from a gender perspective need to be further published and more widely used and promoted to guide the programmes of SPC and national agencies fisheries. The studies are unique and valuable.

The written records of high-level SPC meetings show that when SPC has undertaken women/gender work, it has achieved a high standard — as indeed it does in all its work — and the work has been appreciated by Pacific countries. Several times, the Secretariat was requested to raise the funds to continue or expand the work. However, when the Secretariat did not achieve this, and took the topic off the agenda, the issue was not raised by the countries. This has been the case since 2001, although substantial work has been done under PROCFish and SciCOFish.

In addition to supporting the *Women in Fisheries Information Bulletin*, where will SPC go now on women/gender in aquaculture and fisheries?

The first step must be to immediately revisit the Strategic Plan, with a small group of women/gender in aquaculture, fisheries and development experts from the region and beyond, to develop some sound objectives and targets. Gender equality must be brought into the new objectives as a social justice issue in addition to recognition of the economic case that can be made in its favour. To support such efforts, maximum use must be made of the PROCFish findings and all other relevant data and publications. A simple first step would be to

create gender-themed pages on the FAME website and make all relevant SPC publications available. All publications relating to women/gender issues must be digitised. Although the Digital Library is excellent, it requires a reasonable level of knowledge of the types of documents that are available to search. A gender page could provide guidance and easier access to content.

To date, SPC's women/gender work has largely related to fisheries; women must not be left behind in aquaculture as it develops. In other regions, signs are already emerging that this is indeed happening.

Finally, all organisations that have previously ignored gender find that major internal cultural and attitudinal changes are required when gender is added to the programme. These changes need enlightened leadership and time. As the key fisheries and aquaculture regional body, SPC must both lead itself and be the leader. The *Women in Fisheries Information Bulletin* is well established and highly respected. It will be the perfect platform from which SPC can show the region what it is doing and how it is changing.

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Most of the information for this article was sourced from the reports and papers available in the SPC FAME digital library.

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