

Pacific women's participation in fisheries science and management

Patricia Tuara and Kelvin Passfield worked on the gender objective of the SciCOFish project,¹ which is to increase the benefits to women from the fisheries sector by increasing women's participation in oceanic and coastal fisheries science and management. The report of their study is now available,² as well as a brochure presenting the main outcomes and proposals to make fisheries careers more accessible to women.

Case studies were undertaken in Solomon Islands, Marshall Islands and Tonga. In each country, a gender analysis was completed for a range of fisheries-related positions (aquaculture officers, fisheries economists, fisheries management officers, policy and legal officers, post-harvest specialists, marine conservationists and fisheries research officers) involved in inshore and off-shore fisheries.

Women comprise 18% of fisheries staff

The fisheries science and management sector employs more men than women. The case studies show that women comprise only 18% of staff working in this sector (including government fisheries, environmental institutions and environmental nongovernment organisations), or 25% if fishing vessel observers are not included (most are men). In contrast, the percentage of women employed in administrative and clerical roles in government fisheries divisions exceeds 60%.

No physical barriers

Developments over the last two decades in the fisheries science and management sector have resulted in more choices and opportunities for women. Those women who have entered the sector have demonstrated that there are no physical barriers that prevent women from doing the same work as men. Examples include women working as researchers, as observers on fishing boats, and as fieldworkers conducting stock assessments.

Gender stereotypes

Each of the three countries studied has specific constraints that affect the participation of women in fisheries science and management, but there are some common factors, mostly based around societal perceptions.

- The traditional role of women is to be homemakers and caregivers (this results in extra obligations for women who also pursue a career).
- Fisheries in general — and science and management in particular — are technological fields best suited to men; women are more suited to employment in teaching, health, or other fields generally dominated by women.

Breaking down the barriers

There are several ways to increase women's participation in fisheries:

- raise the profile of fisheries as a potential career, and give examples of women already working in the sector;
- provide a support network; and
- strengthen the institutional level (work environment) and improve working conditions.

With the help of fisheries departments, non-governmental organisations, the private sector, development organisations and donor agencies, women are being provided with more opportunities that facilitate choice. Institutions should put more effort in raising awareness about the need to reduce gender barriers and stereotypes throughout the fisheries sector

About gender and equality, not about women

There is a need to inform the public that a fisheries career is open to both women and men. The approach should not be solely to increase women's participation, but to also raise the status of fisheries as a career for young people with an interest in science. At the same time, the fact that women are just as able to participate in the fisheries sector as men needs to be reinforced.

While this study has shown that there is a gender imbalance in the fisheries sector, women should not be pushed into fisheries science and management if a country does not need more fisheries scientists and managers, and if women are not interested in pursuing such careers. However, where there is a need and an interest, women should clearly understand their options, opportunities should be made available, and the choice left to individuals. Women who have an aptitude and desire for a career in fisheries science and management need to know that this is an option, and equal opportunities need to be available to enable them to exercise such an option.

For more information:

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¹ SciCOFish: Scientific Support for the Management of Coastal and Oceanic Fisheries in the Pacific Islands Region

² http://www.spc.int/DigitalLibrary/Doc/FAME/Reports/Tuara_11_GenderOceania.pdf